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ABOVE THE DARK CIRCUS

AN ADVENTURE

BY

HUGH WALPOLE

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
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1931

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FOR
MY FRIEND
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'This form, this face, this life
Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me
Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,
The awakened lips parted, the hope, the new ships.'

T. S. Eliot.

My dear Walter,

I hope that you will not take this Tale too seriously. Once before I had a holiday and wrote a story about a Red-Haired Man and have been distressed ever since at the scientific remarks made about that gentleman!

Now again, in the middle of investigation into the Herries family, I have taken a holiday and enjoyed myself over something that is a tale and nothing but a tale. The second volume of the 'Herries' chronicles will be published in the autumn.

Meanwhile a momentary vision that I had of a room high above the leaping lights of Piccadilly has betrayed me into sheer story-telling. I know that you are a regular schoolboy for stories and therefore I have great pleasure in giving this one to you.

Affectionately,

HUGH WALPOLE

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CHAPTER I

THE BARBER

I AM aware, I fancy, of most of the dangers of narrative in the first person, but it appears to me that there is no other possible method for this particular story.

Swiftly following though the incidents of it were, and involving a number of persons besides myself in very definite dangers, it is not the incidents that seem to me now, after nearly five years' interval, to be of importance, but rather the implications that lay behind them, and especially the implications in Osmund's purpose.

The chief peril, I suppose, that lurks behind narrative in the first person is that of incredulity. How can anyone remember so clearly and repeat so accurately these conversations? Yes, but one doesn't either remember clearly or repeat accurately. One gives the gist of the thing, the spirit of it rather than the letter. Then, further, as to the scenes that one did not oneself witness. Well, in this present adventure, there is, as will afterwards be clear, only one scene at which I was not myself present, and here my informant is so close to myself that it makes no matter.

For the rest I, and I alone, can give you, as I think, the *point* of it all, for I, and I alone, should see it from every angle—yes, from that dizzy catastrophe (for it *was* a catastrophe) under the guttering candles, from that bizarre procession with the loathsome Pengelly, his hat over his eyes, held up under each arm, to that last scene up among the chimney-pots. . . .

This is a pretty portentous beginning. I hadn't intended to start seriously at all, but quite simply with my name and address, so to speak.

My name is Richard Gunn. I was born in the town of Totnes, April 4, 1884. When this adventure began I was standing, naked to the world, save for one half-crown, about five o'clock on a December afternoon, in Piccadilly Circus, wondering what would happen next.

And here I hope you will excuse me for vagueness in the matter of the year. Indeed, I will ask your permission to change the names, not only of persons, but of buildings and addresses in general. Not that it matters very much. There is no one left who can object very strongly, but I like to allow myself that amount of licence. You can trace the places for yourself if you like. They are all, as you will see, within a stone's throw from one another. The Circus dominated us first and last and all the time, played perhaps a bigger part in the adventure than did any of us individually. I don't know. That's for you afterwards to decide.

As to the year, it was after the war and after Eros was removed from its pedestal. Where Eros *had* been, I remember, was the point at which

I was especially staring as I stood on the edge of the kerb, wondering what would happen next.

I had several alternatives in my mind—one was suicide, another robbery, another something not very far from murder. And yet I was not in myself in any way a desperate character—not, probably, desperate enough. I never have been. I was only very cold, very hungry and very hopeless.

My position was in no way a peculiar one at that time. Many another soldier shared it. Before the war I had held for many years a job as land agent in my own county of Devon. Joining up in 1914, I had trusted to a six months' conflict and the resumption of my job again, but Harry Carden, my employer and close personal friend, was dead, and his estate sold, long before the fighting was over. I had saved during the war a sufficiency, and in 1918 had invested it, with a brother-officer, in a pair of charabancs. The charabancs failed—we had not perhaps precisely the right talent for charabancs. I was, after that, secretary to an impatient peeress, secretary to a night club, companion to a deaf and dumb gentleman, assistant in Mr. Swell-in-the-head's Stores and seller-in-ordinary for Fletcher's Patent Fountain Pens. Whatever I touched failed, whatever touched me crumbled to ruin—so here I was on this December afternoon in the year such-and-such, with exactly one half-crown in my pocket, no food in my belly and the bitterest cold in my entrails.

I had, I fancy, no grudge against anybody or anything, not even myself. I did not find that

any of this was my own fault or anyone else's. I blamed neither God nor my fellow-men.

I only wondered what I would do with my last half-crown. Anyone who has been acutely hungry knows how odd a state of fantasy that condition provides. I was not quite sane, nor did I see the rest of the world quite sanely, as I stood at that particular moment, staring at the scaffolding that, guarding the fine new Tube-To-Be, pierced upwards into the London pea-soup sky and the shadowy casual flakes of falling snow.

I was a little cracked, to be honest. I had had nothing to eat since yesterday midday. I had left my lodging very early that morning, without waiting for my breakfast, and that because I knew that I should be unable to pay Mrs. Greene for it. On the preceding evening I had settled my weekly bill, smiled into Mrs. Greene's kindly, bulging countenance (she had a face just like a large bath-bun), and then, in the sinister silence of my room, examining my resources, found that I had exactly half a crown.

I had been, I must tell you, for the last month, searching every nook and cranny of London for a job. I am aware that it is a commonplace of comfortable and easily circumstanced people to say that any man who really wants a job can find one. I assure them that this is not so. It was not so nearly five years ago, and still less is it so to-day. I had submitted during that month to every sort of indignity. I had approached (hating myself and them) certain old friends, and I do not know which was the more horrible, their consciousness of their

unhappy discomfort at being asked or my consciousness of *their* consciousness.

I was determined that I would neither borrow nor receive the gift of money without some sort of work offered in return. But the trouble was that nobody wanted my work—I was ready to do anything, yes, anything at all, clean the steps, clean the floors, black the shoes, but there was already a multitude of eager persons performing these offices. I was not alone in asking the question at this time—How was it that a war which slaughtered millions of human beings left the world a great deal fuller than it had found it?

What I was not in the least prepared for was the vile and greasy, patronising, indifferent complacency of Mr. Bilgewater, the founder-and-head of the great Bilgewater Stores in Mannequin Street. He had announced that he was anxious to assist officers who were out of a job, and I secured an interview with him. I can see him still, sitting, a bloated, grey-haired, swollen-with-self-satisfaction spider, inside his fine money-coining web, looking across his shiny desk at me and asking me how a man of my age dared to come and waste his precious time by expecting a job from him. I gently hinted . . . but I won't go on. Even after this passage of time my hand trembles when I think of him. I can only hope that one day Saint Peter, who must be on the whole a just soul and quite free of snobbery, gives him, before he admits him through the Golden Gates, a piece of his mind.

This little incident cured me of supplicating.

I swore that I would beg no more. Suicide, robbery or murder—they seemed to my starving belly and hot, fiery head, that was bursting with fantastic visions, no impossible alternatives. I had been walking about all day, and yet I was not weary. I was sustained by a sort of glow, a fire fanned and decorated by hunger, a sense of injustice, a sort of exultation, because now, at this desperate moment, I really felt myself to be touching the very heart of life,—and a lot of indignant self-pride.

I had no possessions in the world save some clothes in a drawer at Mrs. Greene's, the garments I was wearing, and Lockhart's edition of Motteux's *Don Quixote*; four volumes of which were at Mrs. Greene's and one, the first, in my hand. That book I possessed owing to an act of mad extravagance four days earlier. I had seen the volumes in a second-hand bookshop, moderately priced, and had incontinently gone in and purchased them, thereby ridding myself of twenty-one shillings out of twenty-five, the most unreasonable act possibly of all my life.

It was no excuse that *Don Quixote* was my favourite book in the world and Lockhart's my favourite edition. It was a piece of fantastic extravagance, and how could I tell at the time that it was to play so important a part in the wildest sequence of events so shortly afterwards?

In any case I was holding this, the first volume of the five, in my hand as I stood there staring at the scaffolding, and I remember quite clearly putting the volume, with its handsome old rose-

red cover and crimson leather label, under my overcoat that it might not have damage from the falling snow.

For the rest my clothes were decent; and as I was myself broadly made, ruddy in colour, short and sturdy of build, none of the many who jostled by and around me had, I am sure, the slightest notion of the especial straits that I was in.

The point that I was at this moment debating was the destination of my final half-crown.

When you have only one half-crown left in the world it is astonishing the number of things you can do with it, but on this particular occasion it was quite definitely a choice between two—should it be spent on a meal or a hair-cut? For nearly a month I had not had my hair cut, and this, I imagine, from some sense of its extravagance. It would, in fact, have been cheap at almost any price, for if there is a thing in this world that makes me feel myself a dirty degenerate swine, it is the creeping of long hair about my neck.

The great question was—would half a crown do it, for a shampoo must be included? Was a shampoo enough? You may say that such a hesitation between a meal and a hair-cut was, for a starving man, an impossibility. I can only tell you that I did so hesitate, and that this same hesitation altered not my own life only, but the lives of many others.

I considered the meal. Could I have enough for half a crown? Or would I not, once I had started, be driven by my appetite into a whale of a meal, and then be arrested for non-payment?

On the other hand, would not the cool and cleanliness about my neck, the freshness of the shampoo . . . ? My whole body trembled as I felt the firm hands of the barber pressing into my scalp, the soft foamy luxury of the soap, the touch of the cold water after the hot. . . . Two rival sensuousnesses—my last perhaps. Or my first—which way was I to go?

I have said that hunger had made me a little fantastic. It was not the real world that I saw when I looked up and around me. Or was it? Who knows?

I looked up and across the Circus, and the first things that I saw were the green and red lights dancing on walls of the buildings opposite me. These stars of green and red flashed and twinkled, vanished, returned, flashed and twinkled again. There was still in the air a dim grey shadow of departing day, so that these recurrent stars had a particular unreality about them that gave them, in a queer way, an especial urgency for myself. They seemed to be inviting me to something.

High on the wall on the farther side of the Avenue was a goblet of gold that rose slowly, tilted itself awkwardly, and then ejected some liquid with an air of quite ridiculous self-satisfaction.

The reflection of its gold and crimson shone dully in the dead windows behind me—the reflection was sulky and vengeful, as though the windows were angry and sullen at the use to which they were being put. Not only did these lights seem to have some especial personal mean-

ing for me, but also for the people who were passing on every side of me. The Circus was only moderately crowded, but I noticed that everyone was clinging to the pavement as though a step forward meant ruin.

In my own excited state this did not seem at all unnatural. Because the day had not quite departed the centre of the Circus was sinking into a dusk that resembled to my heated gaze the grey waters of a pool, and I had the fancy that the omnibuses charging up the hill from the Mall, circling round from Piccadilly, were uncouth and barbarous monsters plunging to the pool for a savage drink.

'Well for us all,' something said, 'that we cling to this pavement. There's danger at every step.'

So the monsters panted to the pool and, under the twinkling and derisive lights that flashed so meaninglessly now against empty space as the evening darkened, drank their fill.

Then, looking about me, I noticed people. I noticed first the fat, shapeless beggar of the especially blind eyes who, with his shiny tin cup and the board across his chest, had just this moment arrived and stationed himself quite close to me against the wall. He, too, seemed to have a peculiar meaning for me. (What an empty stomach can do to your imagination if you only give it rope enough!)

I had seen him arrive, led by a little, shabby woman in a black hat and with black cotton gloves on her hands. The moment she had stationed him

against the wall she gave his board a twitch and without a word left him, shuffling off into the crowd. There he stood, gazing with piercing blind intentness at the twinkling stars of red and green.

A thin clergyman, with an eager countenance, hesitated beside me, looked as though he would speak, and moved away. Two women, very gay and hustling, ranged at my side. 'Well,' said one over my head to the other, 'cheerio.'

'Cheerio,' said the other. The first one waited a moment, then said again:

'Cheerio, dear.'

'Cheerio,' said the other. The first one vanished, the second one looked right through me as though I were not there. I felt suddenly dead, dead and buried. No, I was not dead. I was conscious of my beastly hair, hot and uncomfortable against my neck.

'It shall be a hair-cut,' I decided. Then my belly called out 'Steak and Kidney.' The golden bottle cocked itself up against the dark, scorned me, and ejected its liquid. Something inside me said: 'See what the book says!' So I took *Quixote* out from under my coat and opened it.

I read:

'*The knight was yet asleep, when the curate came attended by the barber, and desired his niece to let him have the key of the room where her uncle kept his books, the author of his woes. . . .*'

The Barber! There was an omen for you! The fates had decided. I moved forward to my destiny.

These details must seem to you of excessive unimportance, and I can well understand your disbelief in my memory of them, but it is precisely these things that one does remember for ever and ever amen, even to the rather worn semi-shiny buttons on the eager clergyman's coat.

After a moment's hesitation I pushed forward across the waters of the Circus, escaped narrowly two charging monsters that seemed to snort fire and smoke at me as they passed, and arrived on dry land on the spot where Eros once was. Here I drew breath. My legs were trembling under me. I felt faint with a gripping pain like a harsh-taloned hand laid at my entrails. Once more (and, as it happened, for the last time) I hesitated. Did I yield to the temptation of the hair-cut I must, afterwards, either finish things once and for all or commit crime for a meal. I faced, I think, in that bitter instant the ultimate degradation. I was ready to do anything for a meal, sell my soul, my body (one often enough involving the other) to anybody for anything. A moral world? It had ceased to exist for me, and in its room there was this strangely beautiful evil place, shot with coloured lights that broke and flashed and trembled across the sky above my head, while at my feet there were these strange sluggish waters, iridescent, cleft by monsters, bordered by walls of grim grey stone. Out of them there stepped to my side a slim, horrible creature in a shining top-hat, a black overcoat, with a white camellia in its button-hole.

'Good evening,' it said.

'Good evening,' I replied.

'There's more snow coming,' it continued.

'Probably,' I answered.

'Going my way?' it asked. I nearly answered that I was if it would provide me with a meal. Its face was very white under its shiny hat. It had long hands in white gloves. I hesitated and was saved, for, looking up, I saw the golden goblet raise itself and illuminate with its light the neighbouring windows. On these were inscribed in big black letters, 'Gentlemen's and Ladies' Hairdressers—Manicure—Massage.'

'Coming my way?' it said again. It had dead eyes and wide, hungry nostrils to its nose.

'I think not,' I answered, and pushed out into the stream again.

And even now the guiding finger had not finished with me. I had landed, panting a little, as though I had run a long way, at the corner of Shaftesbury Avenue. There was now but a short step across to the other side of the street. Facing me was the corner of the Trafalgar Theatre, and above it on the second floor the high windows of the big hairdresser's establishment. I was about to take that step when someone jogged my elbow. I heard a thick, rather drunken voice say: 'A fat lot of use God would be in this place,' and, turning, saw above me, swinging over the heads of the crowd, a long pole, and on the end of it a placard with the words: 'Thou God seest Me.'

This pole was carried by an old gaunt man with a long, straggling grey beard and a shabby coat that fell to his heels. He was shuffling along

bearing his banner on high, and as he jostled me I noticed that he was feeling with his spare hand in his pocket for food.

There were some crumbs on his beard. So above the crowd the message floated. Very few gazed up to it, but it passed on serenely, confidently secure in its terrible truth. Its effect upon me was that, looking up to it, I saw above my head and over the sweet-shop behind me a small window with ' Hairdresser—Shaving—Massage ' upon it. The window was surrounded with fantasy. Not far away from it were three timepieces which, with bland, naked faces, warned the crowd beneath them of its swift passage towards remorseless eternity, and all around the timepieces and the barber's window were the dancing stars of red and green that I had seen from the farther bank of the pool.

Why should I cross the road when there was a barber's shop here at my elbow? Moreover, there was something in the window of the sweet-shop that tore at my guts with a frightful agony.

It was not sugar that my hunger really needed, but nevertheless the sight of those piled-up heaps, the marzipan, the crystallised fruit, the huge cake with a pagoda in pink and red icing, the chocolates, the slabs of cocoanut-cream. . . . One clutch of the hand, one sweep of the arm, down those heaps would come, I would tear the pagoda. . . . I had sense enough left me to pass swiftly by the shop and climb the few dark, twisting stairs to the glass door with ' W. JACOBY, HAIRDRESSER ' inscribed upon it. A little more temptation, a very

little more. . . . I pushed that door back as though I were fleeing from the devil.

So dark and grubby a little room was it that, after a glance at it, I almost retired. After all, if this hair-cut were to be the last grand and independent action of my life I might as well have a good one. But the sense that if I passed that sweet-shop again I might yield, at this second time, to my craving temptations held me. No, I dared not risk it. So I walked forward.

It was a bizarre enough room. The blinds were not down, and I was still pursued by the golden goblet, which was now, from the opposite side of the street, almost on a level with me, and as the flash of its shining liquid came and went the lights struck the room where I was, vanished, and struck again as though they were fingers of some illuminated hand hunting on this dusty floor for some treasure. For dusty it was. I have seldom seen a more neglected place, and the scrubby little barber was as neglected as his den. There were three basins with their mirrors stuck against the wall. On the other side of the room were some chairs, and here two men were waiting.

The barber himself was misshapen, his dusty head sunk between his shoulders, and on his countenance as surly an expression as I had ever seen on any human face. He had a large walrus moustache, and the ends of this he was frequently snapping at.

He said nothing to me when I came in, and I sat down on one of two empty chairs.

I was now quite light-headed with hunger,

weariness and a sense of rebellion against all human things. What had I ever done that I should have been brought to this pass? I was no worse than my fellows, better indeed than a great many of them. I turned round on the little, amiable, apple-faced man who was sitting next to me and chuckling over the innocuous pages of *Punch*. For two pence I could have caught him by the neck and swung him to and fro, demanding of him why he and his fellows had treated me so unjustly.

But he took my gaze for amiability.

'That's a good one,' he said, grinning and handing me the *Punch*. It was at this point, I think, that my past began to mingle inextricably with my present—as though, if you like, my past knew that in another quarter of an hour it was going to concern me very actively and that it might as well prepare me for that. Never mind the scenes that I saw—a door half opened; a mirror framing a face of rage and vengeance; a mean, spindle-shanked little man stealing down a garden path; eyes, the most beautiful in the world to me, telling me of a trust and affection for which I had never dared to hope . . . sad, wasted, ironical pictures, crowding into the room on the recurring, reflected impulses of that golden flashing light.

The door opened and a sailor came in. He was a big, red-faced fellow in sailor's kit, a somewhat rare sight in the West End, and he carried a sailor's bundle. It was at once evident that he was pleasantly drunk. He rolled a little in his walk and greeted us all with the most cheerful of

smiles. He lumbered to the chair next to mine and sat down heavily upon it.

The barber glanced at him with exceeding disfavour. He looked about him with beaming interest, whistled loudly, snapped his fingers, smacked his bulging thighs.

At last, looking at the three of us who were waiting, he said huskily:

'Wonder if you gents would mind. I know you're first . . . don't want to presume, but it's only a shave I want and I'm going to Newcastle. First time 'ome for three years; 'aven't seen the kids for three years, gentlemen, and if I miss the 6.30 . . . 'E can give me a quick shave and if 'e don't I'll wring 'is bleeding neck.'

The barber turned and gave him a look of saturnine murder but said no word. We all at once meekly agreed that the sailor should have the next turn. This elated him greatly. He walked about the room whistling and lumbering from article to article, examining everything — the almanac, with a pink-cheeked girl holding a bunch of roses, the advertisements of hair-restorer and shaving-soap. He stopped before the pink-cheeked girl and said, lurching:

'She's my fancy!'

The young man upon whom the barber had been operating, his job concluded, rose and went for his hat and coat. The sailor immediately plopped into his place and stared very gravely into the mirror, feeling his cheek for pimples. Then suddenly remembering, rose heavily, crossed the floor, and with the greatest care and reverence

placed his bundle on the chair where he had been waiting, then returned to the seat of ceremony.

The barber approached him with looks of surly disgust. I thought he would refuse to shave him, but he said nothing, only stropped his razor furiously. Then he lathered half the sailor's face, paused, and, shaving-brush in one hand, with the other took the sailor's bundle from the chair and dropped it on the floor. The sailor said nothing to this, but, when his face was completely lathered, gave the barber a wave of the hand as though to say 'Just wait a moment,' got up, crossed the floor and lifted his bundle on to the seat again. No one uttered a word, but we three spectators sat in our seats watching this drama with absorbed attention.

The barber shaved with great care half the sailor's face, then gently moved back and placed the bundle on the floor, the sailor watching his action with grave intensity in the mirror. When the razor had passed once completely over his countenance he again motioned politely to the barber with his hand, rose and replaced his bundle on the chair. The barber lathered his face again, then once more crossed to the bundle, but on this occasion threw it violently on to the floor. Still no word was spoken. Yet again the sailor replaced it. Yet again the barber threw it down.

The air was now breathless with suspense. The sailor rose, seeming now to be twice his former bulk.

''Ow much?' he asked gravely, feeling in his deep, wide pocket.

'Three pence,' said the barber. The sailor, after some fumbling, found his pennies and delivered them, then with a husky 'Take that for your bloody cheek,' drove his fist full into the barber's face. The barber crumpled and fell.

Instantly there was pandemonium. The little apple-faced man who had been reading his *Punch* so amiably was changed into a demon of fury and rage. He flung himself on to the sailor. The other observer, a long, thin fellow, rushed shouting to the door. The barber, surprisingly alive, raised himself on to his knees and bit the sailor's thigh. The sailor himself rolled about, shouting and waving his arms; chairs tumbled over, bottles fell with a crash, two men came in and joined the fray.

The door was open; my eyes were upon it. Someone peered in, looked about him, and cautiously stepped into the room.

One glance was enough for me. My heart thundered in my ears, the room swam before me. The sight of that mean-faced, spindle-shanked, narrow-eyed little man was the ghost of all my past, the link with everything that should have been my future, the link that, for more than fourteen years, I had been seeking.

Mr. Leroy Pattison Pengelly.

CHAPTER II

SPINDLE-SHANKS IN A DARK GARDEN

It will be remembered that when Sancho Panza told his master the story of the beautiful shepherdess, Toralva, Don Quixote could not count the number of goats carried by the fisherman across the stream in his boat.

Quoth Sancho: 'How many goats are got over already?'

'Nay, how the devil can I tell?' replied Don Quixote.

'There it is!' quoth Sancho, 'did not I bid you keep count? On my word, the tale is at an end, and now you may go whistle for the rest.'

'Ridiculous,' cried Don Quixote. 'Pray thee, is there no going on with the story unless I know exactly how many goats are wafted over?'

'No, marry is there not,' quoth Sancho, 'for as soon as you answered that you could not tell, the rest of the story quite and clean slipped out of my head; and in troth it is a thousand pities, for it was a special one.'

'So then,' cried Don Quixote, 'the story's ended?'

'Ay, marry is it,' quoth Sancho. 'It is no more to be fetched to life than my dead mother.'

The time has come for me too, before my story can move a step forward, to number my goats. The trouble is not so much in my numbering them, as in selecting the best ones for my purpose. There are so many and they all seem to be conveyed over in the fisherman's boat together.

The period that I must recover is a short one —only six weeks—and the place is definite enough. I will call it Howlett Hall—a name sufficiently near to the reality—and closing my eyes can see again those dark, squat buildings, the beautiful Park running to the sea's very edge, the Devon sea with the red cliffs, the mild lisp of the waves on the shingle in that summer weather, the cooing of the doves in the trees that were scattered on the edge of the shaven lawn, old red-faced Harry Carden calling to his dogs, all the easy, lazy social life of that wealthy care-free world before the war.

And into that easy, normal world stepped, one summer afternoon, the three figures of my drama. Looking back, it seems queer enough, although at the time it was nothing, that these three should have all come into my life on the same day, almost at the same moment—John Osmund, Leroy Pengelly—and Helen Cameron. . . .

Pengelly was the first. I was Harry Carden's land agent, and we were, had been for several years, the greatest friends. Had he lived it would have been another story for me. Of course he was years older than I; our relationship was almost that of father and son—dear Harry with his oaths

and tempers and stubbornness and charity and secret shy kindnesses and love of women, dogs and every earthly kind of sport!

Simple! It seems impossible that there should be anyone alive in this complicated world of to-day so guileless.

Well, at about three o'clock of that hot, shimmering afternoon we walked down to the beach to see about some nets that Carden had ordered from a fisherman, saw two nets, watched for a little the sea swell lazily in over the hot dry pebbles, breaking, like the outstretching paw of a sleepy cat, across the rising ridge; then turned back through the little village.

Outside the one and only pub there was standing a man. I noticed him because I knew every soul in the village, and this was a new face to me. When we had struck up through the Park gates Harry said:

'So Pengelly's back again.' He said it, I remember, in a tone that roused my interest, for he disliked so few of his fellow-beings that the grating displeasure in his voice was sufficiently remarkable. I asked who Pengelly might be. Now here I perceive the danger of melodrama. Pengelly is, I suppose, the villain of this piece if any villain there be, although it is possibly one of the small values of this story that it contains neither villain nor hero. I should like to be fair to Pengelly, especially in consideration of later events, but, however fair one may try to be, one cannot escape his nastiness. It exuded from him always and everywhere. Harry was the most

generous-minded of men, but at once when he spoke of Pengelly, a sort of disgusting atmosphere crept about us, the air seemed to darken, the warmth of the sun to grow less kindly.

There are one or two people in the world who darken the air, not so much by anything they do as by what simply, of themselves, and possibly quite without their own fault, they are. Not that Pengelly stopped at mere existence; he was quite an active personality until—but what happened to him comes later.

Carden did not say much about Pengelly just then—only that he was the nastiest, meanest, most abject little scoundrel born of woman; that he had come to the village some five years ago, agent, *he* declared, for some kind of photographic firm; that he had a wife whom he bullied; that he was never seen by anyone to do any work but simply slouched around the place: many things were suspected of him, very little proved. Then a girl in the village had a baby of which he was supposed to be the father, his wife died suddenly, and he vanished—to the great relief of everyone. And yet the unexpected thing was, Carden added, that he had a kind of fascination for some people. Even Carden himself had felt it. He was very glib in his talk, had plenty of stories to tell, had travelled, apparently, and his conceit and self-confidence were boundless.

'I hope he's not come back to stay,' said Carden, and a kind of depression fell between us. I am even fanciful enough to imagine that life was never quite the same careless, happy thing

for either of us after the moment when we saw Pengelly leaning his scarecrow of a body up against the wall of the 'Farmer's Boy,' his hands in his pockets and his bony, ugly head thrust forward in that snake-like, piercing way that was so characteristic of him.

That was to be, however, an eventful afternoon for me, and the second new encounter that it brought me quickly knocked the first out of my head.

When we reached the house and stretched ourselves out in chairs on the lawn with a good cool drink at our elbow, Harry told me that people were coming to tea. Borlass and his stout lady and imbecile daughter for three—and two others.

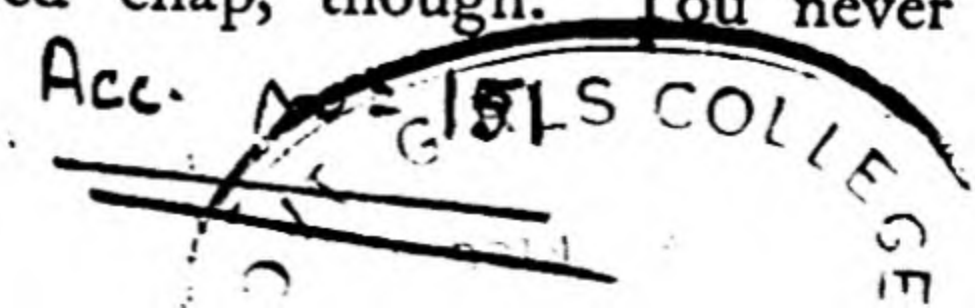
'John Osmund,' said Harry, 'and the lady who is to marry him.'

'And who may John Osmund be?' I asked him.

Carden told me. John Osmund was a remarkable fellow. One of those men who could do anything if he liked. But he didn't like. And yet you couldn't call him a slacker. He was always doing something and doing it well, but they were odd, unnecessary jobs, jobs that no one else thought of doing.

Where did he come from? Nobody knew. He said that he belonged to some Glebeshire family. Oh yes, he was a gentleman all right. Extraordinarily handsome fellow and a giant. Must be six foot six at least and carried himself firmly as though he had been commanding people all his life.

Funny-tempered chap, though. You never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knew what was likely to upset him—went off the rocker at the slightest thing, and when he did lose his temper it was something to see. For the rest he was as sweet as a nut and his laugh was worth going a mile to hear. But he had odd bees in his bonnet. Couldn't bear this democratic twaddle and yet was always palling up with fellows out of his own class, not just talking to them, but made real friends of them and didn't mind who saw him with them. It was *crowds* that he said he hated and the way that everyone cheapened everything. He called it a *half-baked* age, and hated it for being that, said he would like to drop bombs on half humanity and leave room for the rest to grow properly. And yet he was the kindest-hearted of men, no crank, you understand, only talked of these things when he was roused.

I asked some more questions and discovered that he had been staying for a long time at the 'Trout Inn' at Amberthwaite, a village some five miles in the Exmouth direction. He kept a horse and looked mighty fine riding it.

And the lady? Helen Cameron? She used to come down here often with the Fosters when they rented Onsett. She was an Edinburgh girl. I must have seen her. Three years ago she was down here, but was only a bit over sixteen, had her hair down. She was nearly twenty now. An orphan, very independent, a delightful girl and fascinated by Osmund.

She had arrived on her own about a month ago, met Osmund and become at once engaged to him. The odd thing, Carden said, was that he didn't

think that she was really in love with him. There was no doubt of Osmund's feeling for her; he was simply mad about her, but his will seemed to have overpowered hers, which was saying something, because she was one of the strongest-willed and most independent women in the world. But they were a striking pair, both so good-looking, so unlike other people, so individual and alone. I'd be interested in both of them when I saw them. I felt that I would.

I had no questions to ask about Sir Nevil Borlass and his wife. I knew him well enough—commonplace, greedy, self-satisfied, vulgar. He had inherited a fortune from his father and owned a huge place, Pecking, some ten miles distant from Howlett. He wasn't a bad fellow, I suppose, but arrogant, greedy and stupid.

'As a matter of fact,' said Carden, 'I'm sorry I've asked them at the same time as Osmund. Osmund hates them both like poison and he's no swell at hiding his feelings. You may have the luck to see him in one of his tempers. It's worth seeing.'

I did, as it happened, have that luck, and I'm never likely to forget it.

Osmund and his lady walked over from Amberthwaite.

When I saw them standing together on the sun-drenched lawn it was all I could do to restrain an exclamation. There are some people in the world —a few—like that, made, it seems, of different clay from the rest of us.

Osmund would have excited attention any-

where. His height did not seem excessive because he carried himself so magnificently. When I knew him better it was always a trick he had of throwing his head back, a gesture of freedom, of strength, of independence, quite impossible to give any real sense of, that seemed especially his. He was dark and with just that amount of foreignness in his colour that our Celts often have. You would have known him for an Englishman anywhere, though. His smile was delightful, boyish and discerning. His anger—well, I shall have an opportunity of describing that in a moment.

And Helen? If this story has neither hero nor villain, at least it has a heroine. How shall I describe her as she was on that first day? I can remember very little of that first impression. She was slim, tall, dark-haired like Osmund, and I fancy that on that first afternoon I thought her sullen, conceited, fond of her own opinion, a little arrogant.

To tell the truth, I was, I think, on that day so deeply struck by Osmund that I paid little attention to Helen. She certainly paid none at all to me. She had, as I was to learn afterwards, other things just then to think about.

We all sat down together and were very happy. How charming Osmund could be when he liked! He was the most perfectly natural being I have ever known. When he was at his ease and trusted his company he was like a cheery, happy-go-lucky boy who hadn't a bother in the world.

At any rate that was what he was on this first meeting—before all his trouble came.

I don't think that any of us heard Fate mutter in our ears as the Borlass family appeared on the horizon, 'Here's the end of your happiness.' No, we didn't hear, but if we had we should have heard the truth.

A more commonplace trio you couldn't have found in all England; Borlass with his thick neck and swelling stomach, and stout calves ridiculous in their rough pinky-brown stockings; Lady Borlass, a stout little woman who walked like a chicken looking for seed. She was always overdressed and, for so small a woman, wore an astonishing amount of jewels. She was famous for her jewels. Her daughter was a large lumpy girl with spectacles and a deep bass voice. She laughed like a man too, and seemed to take the deepest interest in everything that you said. Only her eyes betrayed her, for they stared through their glasses with a blank vacancy which showed that she never listened to a word that anyone uttered. It was her obsession (and also the obsession of her parents) that every male and every mother of every male pursued her for her money.

As a matter of fact, it's my opinion that no one pursued her at all and that she was cross and lonely, poor thing.

In any case, here they were, Lady Borlass picking her way between her two large companions, who marched one on either side of her as though they were protecting her from rape and battery. She carried in her hand a lorgnette, and every once and again she would stop for a moment and examine the ground exactly like a hen looking for seed.

I have taken some while in describing this family because of its importance in what happened afterwards. The important event on this particular afternoon will take no time at all to describe.

I remember, as though it were yesterday, the immediate change in Osmund as the Borlasses appeared.

To say that it was childish inadequately describes it. His face that had a second before been open, jolly and most handsomely engaging was suddenly rebellious, ill-tempered and petulant. We all know people who are simply unable to behave decently in company that is uncongenial to them, and, however charming they may be, we do on the whole avoid them because of the awkward situations that crop up in their society—so it was now with Osmund. Harry, Helen Cameron and myself were at once uncomfortable. It was as though we had taken out into grown-up company a child who might at any moment behave indecently. Only the Borlasses noticed nothing. They patronised us all, ate their cucumber sandwiches with complete satisfaction, behaved as though they had bought all the world for a song.

The crash came, as unexpectedly for them as though a naked Pan had broken suddenly through the thicket. The affair had upon Lady Borlass just that effect. She had been speaking of her maid-servants; she had a high-pitched, immensely superior voice, cold like a lump of ice falling into a drink, cultivated, I've no doubt, in the early days when her own family was not quite so 'county' as

it might have been. She talked of her servants as though they were a party of savages that had been brought over to England for her from Central Africa. 'After all,' she said, 'one expects stupidity, but *such* idiocy . . .'

Osmund jumped to his feet. The whole of his six foot six hung over us.

'Idiocy! Idiocy!' he cried. 'If that isn't just characteristic of all of you! Because you've got money to spend you think that you're better than the men and women worth a thousand of you. I bet you're as useless a woman as exists. You and your husband just cumber the ground, and it would be better for everyone if you were under it. I haven't been here for months without knowing something about you—with your conceit and laziness and ignorance. . . . Oh, damn! I beg your pardon, Carden. I've behaved like a swine. Sorry. I'll be going. . . .'

It was that or something like that. I only know that after all these years the anger and impatience and lack of control of that outbreak have for me still the effect as though the sky had cracked asunder and a bolt, black and thunderous, crashed to our feet!

Anyway, Osmund went—there and then, without another word to any of us, strode furiously across the lawn and was gone. The tea-party, needless to say, was ended. I can see yet the look of staggered surprise in the Borlass countenances, as though a damp rag had been pressed there and wiped all the modelling away. Helen Cameron said not a word.

Next day I met Osmund by the seashore. Shamefaced he confessed his sins. He had behaved, he supposed, like a perfect cad? I said that he had. Was Carden furious? Yes, Carden was furious. He'd better go up, he supposed, and take his licking. He liked Carden. He'd take any beating he wanted to give him. I suggested that he should write a note of apology to Lady Borlass. But that he wouldn't hear of. He had, he considered, committed no crime at all so far as the Borlasses were concerned. He'd been wanting to say something to them ages back; it was only saying it in Harry Carden's garden that was wrong, under old Harry's roof, so to speak, and in front of myself and Miss Cameron.

But there it was. He had the devil of a temper; he had always had one and never learnt to control it as a kid. People like the Borlasses made him feel sick. But he apologised to me, and would perfectly understand if I never wanted to speak to him again.

I liked him. I couldn't help but like him. You'd have liked him had you known him at that time.

He took then a surprising fancy to myself, and in a short while we were seeing one another very often. Three things I noticed about him. One was that, charming, kindly, humorous as he mostly was, these sudden winds of passion were at any time liable to ruffle his spirit. Secondly, that he was a poet with a real worship of beauty in every possible form—nature, art, music, letters, character,

everything—and that, just now, this love of beauty was all directed into the channel of his worship for Helen Cameron. Thirdly, that, as Carden said, he made the oddest intimacies with men quite outside his own class and education.

Not many days passed before I met such a friend, Charlie Buller by name. Buller was short, sturdy, with a certain air of hostler about him. He was a jolly little man, with pleasant wrinkles about his eyes and an apple-brown complexion. He had no especial purpose in life that I could see except to joke about everything. I wouldn't have been at all surprised at his having done time. He was as reticent about his past as his present—altogether not at all the sort of friend for Osmund. But then Osmund, gentleman as he was, was most certainly adventurous also. No one knew anything at all about *his* past. Helen Cameron herself had no idea whether he had relations, whether he had been in the Army, whether he had any means.

She was hypnotised by him as, to a certain degree, I was myself.

Then an awful thing happened. I fell in love with Helen Cameron. How often in the years that followed I looked back and asked myself whether I could have done anything, anything at all, to have prevented this. Now I know that I could not. It was one of the strands—and not the least important one either—in the strange plot in which we were all at last to figure.

At the time it was madness and worse. I was Osmund's friend for one thing; for another, I

didn't want just then to fall in love with anyone; for a third, I had no reason to think that she had any interest in me: if she thought of me at all, she seemed to dislike me. But it happened—as inevitably and, it seemed, as hopelessly as all the rest of this incredible business.

And, what is more, I knew the exact moment *when* it happened.

I had walked with Osmund and Helen to the Park gate. As we reached it the rain began. All the trees above our heads trembled; there were the secret urgent whispers of a coming storm. He drew her under the cover of his waterproof, but just before they turned down the windy road, meeting the rain, she looked back and smiled.

I stood there looking after her, looking beyond her into an angry tear of yellow sky that slashed the thick grey. I knew in that moment that I loved her. I hoped at first that it was a passing fever, caught from the quietness and remoteness of our life in this little place. I left next morning for London. I returned a week later, knowing that this was something far different from any love-affair of my life. Yes, and by God, so it has been!

I returned to find one or two odd things. One was that Osmund's friend, Charlie Buller, had someone lodging with him, a big, flabby, balloon-like man with a remarkably small head. His name was Hench. He had a funny squeaky voice like a woman's, but he seemed not a bad fellow from Osmund's account of him, kindly, ready to do anything for anyone. All the same,

they were, both of them, strange friends for Osmund to have. And then I discovered a queerer thing yet. They were, both of them, Buller and Hench, hand in glove with the horrible Pengelly. I saw the three of them constantly together, and, stranger yet, Osmund, it seemed, on passable terms with Pengelly. I spoke to Carden about this. He only shrugged his shoulders. Since that scandalous outburst he had seen very little of Osmund. A fellow who behaved like that to your guests—well, it made a chap uncomfortable. . . .

Then things moved quickly. Looking back now, I feel that I was in a kind of dream during those weeks, and not a very pleasant dream either. Now that I had fallen in love with Helen, I perceived in her every kind of sweetness, nobility and charm. But I had to behave decently. I avoided her persistently. Everyone thought that I disliked her—Carden, Osmund and Helen herself. I think that it was this sense of my dislike of her that first stirred her interest in me. And she wasn't—although at the time I had no idea of this—at all happy: frightened, uneasy, desperately apprehensive. The more she knew of Osmund the more apprehensive she became.

Even I could see, during those weeks, what a queer fellow he was. Madness does not cover it, neither then nor later. I shall not attempt any analysis of him. At the moment I am concerned only with events; but at least from the very first I realised that Osmund was, so to speak, 'outsize'—not only in physical things, but especially

in spiritual. He had—he must always have had—a sort of wild impatience with life. Things that he read in the paper—little casual wayside things—made him mad with irritation. He wanted to 'get at' people and punish or praise or comfort or expose. He hated injustice and cruelty and meanness with a ferocity that I've never seen equalled in any other human being, but he was himself, in that very hatred, unjust and cruel—mean never.

He really believed, I think, that, were he given a free, omnipotent hand, he would by wholesale executions and wholesale rewards set all the world right. And yet he was not conceited, did not believe in his own powers. I think that it was partly his sense of his own weakness and ignorance that exasperated him.

And beside Osmund and Helen stood Pengelly. Even at that time, before anything had happened, I realised by a kind of spiritual sniffing of the air that Pengelly was mixed up with all of this. I cannot possibly describe the way in which he was for ever turning up. He wore a thin, grey Aquascutum that flapped about his bony legs and, cocked sideways, a bowler too large for him that badly needed brushing. He had a thin cane, with which he used to tap his teeth.

He had nothing to do with any of us, and yet he was always appearing round the corner. He would grin, touch his shabby bowler, look at us as though he had something very important to say and slouch away.

I remember saying to Osmund that I wondered

that Charlie Buller made a friend of him. Buller seemed a decent little chap.

'Oh, it isn't Charlie that's Pengelly's friend,' said Osmund, 'it's Hench.'

And Hench? What was he doing here? Like Buller and Pengelly, nothing at all apparently, slouching about like a bladder that needed pricking, a really comic figure, with that little mild face staring above the big wobbly body. And his voice, whenever I heard it, made me want to giggle like a schoolgirl.

What were they doing? We very soon knew. The climax crashed in upon us as though a grey muddy sky had swamped down and choked us.

I heard it from Carden.

One remembers the most ridiculous details of sudden catastrophic scenes that, with a swing and a push, hammer one's life into a new direction. So, on that sunny morning in Carden's library, I was hammered.

I was, I remember, at that moment trying to write. I have all my life been trying to write in the odd moments between what is, I believe, of vastly more importance, trying to live. Just then I was fancying that I could produce a pretty combination of Nature and Fiction: you know the sort of thing—Beavers and Otters, cranky heroes who think they should redeem the world, and beautiful trusting young girls. The happy combination has never been brought off yet, and I am most certainly not clever enough to manage it.

I had just written a most moving little descrip-

tion of the Otter's life as, pursued by cruel hunters, he was nosing for his three wives everywhere, when Carden came in, his round childish eyes simply popping in his face.

He gasped. He sat down, stuttered as though he would have a fit, then told me. Last night, half an hour after midnight, Osmund, with Buller and Hench in attendance, was arrested in the hall of the Borlass mansion on the charge of attempted burglary.

'Oh, rot!' I shouted, jumping up. 'Osmund . . . Burglary . . . Absurd, impossible!'—and so on.

But it was true, deadly true. Buller and Hench had had masks and lanterns, all the regular paraphernalia.

Osmund had not uttered one word when arrested, simply shrugged his shoulders.

In due time more of the mystery was declared. They had been given away, the three of them. Everything was known to the police long before the attempt. The police, gathered in from Exmouth, were simply waiting for them.

Further than that, it appeared that their betrayer was Pengelly.

Charlie Buller had been, it appeared, the originator of the plan. He had heard of Lady Borlass's jewels, had persuaded an old friend of his, Hench, to come in with him, and there they were. How Pengelly wormed himself into their confidence nobody knew. Why he played the part he did nobody knew either.

He betrayed them from the very first.

But, mystery of mysteries, what had Osmund to do in this *galère*? Osmund, the aristocrat, to be mixed in this degraded crowd, and involved in a burglary as common and vulgar as any in the cheapest novelette!

Not at his arrest, nor at his trial nor afterwards, did he utter a single word. He went to gaol as quietly as he went fishing.

As you may suppose, my first and my last thought was of Helen. What she must be suffering in her love, her pride, her affronted privacy, her sudden loneliness! But was it not human nature that behind this sorrow for her I should, in spite of myself, wonder whether there was not now a chance for me? I might have known her better.

I saw her indeed only once. On a wild stormy afternoon I was battling my way home across the beach and I almost ran into her. We stepped back into some shelter of a rock.

I asked her: 'Is there a thing I can do?'

'Nothing,' she answered me.

Then, holding out her hand to me and smiling, she said: 'He won't tell me why he did it. He'll tell me nothing. I think it was a prank of his at the last minute, to play a game on the Borlasses. I don't know. We shall marry as soon as he comes out.'

Then, looking at me as I'd never seen her look at me, she said: 'I want you to promise one thing.'

'I'll promise anything,' I answered.

'Don't try to see me again. Forget us both. I like life to be difficult, but I don't want it to be

too difficult. If you really wish to help me, promise me that.' And she was gone.

She left me in a state of exaltation, defiance, exasperation. Did she care for me after all? And if she did, wouldn't I fight heaven and earth to have her?

I argued basely with myself that Osmund was my friend no longer, that in any case he could now only make her miserable, that for her sake I must prevent her from what could only be a wretched marriage. I wrote her, again and again, mad, passionate, pleading letters. I received no answer. I could get no news of her. With 1914 came the war and the end of every story.

I had one more glimpse, however, of the villain of this little piece.

In 1915 I was home on leave and, the loneliest soul in the world, sought out the only friend I had. I sent a wire to Carden and followed it down to find the house shut up and Carden in France. I wandered, on a wet, dreary evening, about the gardens already growing wild with neglect, hating the blind, hostile, shuttered windows and the sough of the wind in the trees.

A stormy shivering moon broke out from the clouds and palely lit the lawn, that very lawn upon which, under a blazing sun, Osmund and Helen and I had first met.

As I stood there someone stepped crunchingly on the gravel path before the shuttered windows. I turned, and there was Pengelly. Oh, but unmistakable, his dusty bowler cocked sideways, his Aquascutum flapping at his heels.

He stood there, staring, as though he, too, had seen a ghost. I called his name, 'Pengelly, you dirty swine!' He turned and ran, I followed, but the moon was veiled, the rain came beating down, hammering on the shuttered boards, there was no other sound in the world.

He became, after that, an obsession with me. I was always looking for him. When I saw him I would discover where the Osmunds were and then wring his dirty neck.

But the world is a large place. As I have already told you I went from one miserable job to another, always the image of Helen haunting me, loving only her, not knowing whether she were alive or dead—wanting her . . . wanting her. . . .

And now you know why the sight of Pengelly's hatchet face in that barber's shop was the most momentous vision in the world!

CHAPTER III

OSMUND

I HAD no more thought for barber or barber's shop. My final vision of the place was of the barber and the sailor grappling together in a muttering, gasping embrace among the tumbled chairs and china. I had picked up my hat and coat and was out of the door into the passage.

There was no Pengelly. Indeed there was nothing in the dreary little box of a passage but a dim light and a musty smell of oranges. Then I heard voices. Two people came round the corner of the stairs, and I stood aside that they might go by. A stout woman and a little man. The stout woman was breathing heavily and complaining bitterly.

As they passed me I heard the little man say: 'But how was I to know? You always liked liver and bacon before this. I don't know what's come to you with all these new fancies. . . .'

I waited until they had gone. Everything was as silent as an ice-box. From inside the barber's shop there came no sound. Very cautiously I moved up the stairs, turned the corner, and there on the next landing, looking

up the farther staircase, his head cocked as though he were listening, stood Pengelly.

I drew back in the corner of the staircase, restraining every breath in my body, restraining, yet more, my eager desire to catch his dirty bony neck between my fingers and wring it until his eyes stared over the back of his body!

I didn't move, and Pengelly didn't move either. What it was to me to see him again after all these years! He hadn't changed an iota! His cheek-bones were as prominent, his nostrils as wide and hungry, his eyes as grey and narrow, his mouth as cruel and mean, and his whole air as shabby and dusty as of old. He was an immemorial figure, standing for spite and meanness like a carved figure in a cathedral choir-stall. But, as I looked at him, it was not of himself that my heart was full, but of Osmund and Helen. At last I should have news of them, at last know whether they were alive, whether they were married, yes, even though I had to push his mean eyes into his dirty little face to discover it.

But what, after all, was he doing there? He was engaged, it was plain, on some game of his own, some game that was of great importance to himself. His whole body was strung together in its absorption of eagerness and curiosity. There was something or somebody on the floor above that concerned him very nearly, and I knew enough about him to be aware that it was something that boded ill.

A noise startled him. He turned and, looking back down the staircase, seemed to be staring

right into me. You must remember that here there was only a half-light. A window threw a glow upon his evil countenance, but I was myself in obscurity. I looked into the white frosted door of some offices that had upon the glass names printed in deep black letters.

When he stared at me there was something uncanny about our encounter. For more than fourteen years I had again and again imagined our reunion. With any one of them, Osmund, Helen, Pengelly, Buller, Hench, the meeting would have been enough to have provided a link for me with the others, but, for some reason, it had been Pengelly whom I had first envisaged. How often I had planned just what I would say and do, forcing him on to his knees wherever our meeting might be, and then, having had my will with him, throwing him aside like a dirty rag. But I had never imagined it like this.

He stared at me as though he must see and recognise me, but I realised that he was staring beyond me, down into the dark recesses of the staircase, listening with all his protruding ears for a voice, a footstep, an opening door.

Suddenly he nodded his head, as though he had come to a decision, turned and very cautiously climbed the staircase. For a moment I hesitated. Should I follow him or wait for his return? I didn't want to climb to the next floor and then confront him, when perhaps he had already rung a bell and so could escape into some flat. If I waited where I was he would in all probability return—Or would he? He might be swallowed

up by some apartment and not emerge again that night. The thought decided me. I mounted the stairs after him. I went cautiously, and the turn of the stairs was dark enough to make a slip very easy. I remember that I clutched the volume of *Quixote* to me as though it were a talisman. I emerged on to the next landing, and—there was no Pengelly! He had vanished as though he had never been.

I was caught by a beat of bitter disappointment. I had missed him then! I looked around me. Above me the stairs, thinning now as they reached the heights of the building, in front of me the door of a flat with bell and letter-box but no name, to my right a ledge with a small window.

I went to this last and looked out. The snow had ceased; roofs ran parallel with my vision, roofs and, above and beyond them, some crooked chimneys that, in this half-light, resembled human beings. One chimney near to me, peering over shelving tiles, seemed like a swollen and doubly malevolent Pengelly. The large ears were cocked, the face, thickened and roughened, was corrugated and lined with sneering laughter. But especially it wore exactly that look of evil listening attention that Pengelly had just now worn.

All this was in the air, but, through a division between walls, I could look down, as one looks over a hilly ridge, into the lights of the Circus. The air was thickened and darkened, and so I peered over as it were into a river of light that twinkled and flashed and seemed sometimes to

bubble as though, at any moment, it would burst into flame. I was not, in actual fact, so high here above the ground, but I *seemed* to be high, in a thick grey world with the light flowing like a lava stream between the clefts.

Suddenly, and from the floor below, someone switched on the light and, turning, I saw my little rabbit-hutch of a passage all ablaze. If Pengelly came down now or emerged from that door, nothing could prevent our meeting.

Someone was coming up from the floor below. I waited. A head appeared, then a body. It seemed to me not to be odd at all that in another moment I was face to face with Charlie Buller. I had always told myself that if I ever were lucky enough to encounter one of them he would carry the others with him. I don't know why I had been sure of this. After all nothing was more unlikely. And yet it turned out to be true in a much wider, deeper sense than I had ever suspected. Yes, it turned out to be very true indeed! But at the actual sight of Charlie Buller I must confess that my heart leapt with joy, for Buller meant Osmund and Helen more than Pengelly did. I was sure then, with a glorious triumphant certainty, that my contact with Helen had at last begun again!

Nevertheless, if Charlie was no surprise to me I was like a ghost or miracle to Charlie! He had come up the stairs, his head down, lost in his own thoughts (and, as I was to find out afterwards, he had plenty to think about just then). He almost ran straight into me. He pulled himself up and

then stood there, staring as though, in spite of the light, he must be deceived.

'Well, Charlie,' I said, smiling and holding out my hand. At first glance he looked to me just as he used to look—a little rounder, a little tubbier, clothed in just the same sort of rather loud brown tweeds that he used to wear, his round face of the same ruddy brown colour, his eyes bordered by the same good-humoured wrinkles. I had changed, of course, and, I am afraid, not for the better.

At first he really did not know me.

'Dick Gunn,' I said.

'My God!' he answered, taking me in. He stood looking me over, shook me warmly by the hand, then dropped it as though he had suddenly remembered something.

'Have you come to see . . .?' He stopped abruptly.

'I haven't come to see anyone,' I answered, dropping my voice because I was conscious of Pengelly as though his nasty spying presence were everywhere around us. 'I'm here entirely by chance. I'm jolly glad to see you, though. I've been hoping for years that I should run against you.'

I remember that he made then the movement that I recollected so well, sucking in his cheeks as though he were pulling at a straw, and his eyes narrowed as though he were suddenly suspicious of something.

'Glad to meet you too,' he said, also dropping his voice. 'Long time since we met, isn't it? Plenty happened since. . . .' He broke off, listening.

'Look here,' I went on, 'I don't want to stop you now if you're busy, but I must have a talk with you, and to-night if it's possible.'

'Why, yes,' he said. He was looking around him, staring up the stairs and then at the flat-door.

''Course we'll have a talk—after all this time. Things are pressing a bit at the moment. Where are you staying?'

'Can't we eat together somewhere?' I remember saying that with a grand confidence although my precious half-crown was all that I had. You must remember, too, that all this time I was ravenous with hunger.

'Fact is—Afraid I'm booked. Let's know where to ring you.' I interrupted him. It seemed to me possible that Pengelly might appear at any moment.

'Wait a minute,' I said, 'I must tell you something. Why I'm here at all is that I followed Pengelly. I saw him downstairs, I followed him up. I kept sight of him as far as this landing and then I lost him.'

'Pengelly!' He stiffened like a terrier sighting a rat. 'Pengelly! Already—he's before his time. Did he see you?' he asked, coming nearer to me and dropping his voice yet lower as though we'd become two conspirators.

'No,' I answered. 'What's he doing here? He wasn't up to any good.'

'He never is,' Charlie answered.

I noticed then that he was very different indeed from the man of earlier days. There was some-

thing in the glance of his eye, in his bodily posture, that set him apart not only from myself, but from all the rest of humanity. In the old days he hadn't given a thought to anything at all save the game or rascality of the moment: now he was neither furtive nor secretive—those are not the words—but suspicious of everybody and everything, as though at any moment someone would spring on him from a dark corner and collar him. Then in a flash I realised. It was prison that had made this difference, set him apart, like some member of a monastic order, given him a secret life that no one who had not suffered that experience could understand.

I might not understand, but I sympathised.

He seemed to have made up his mind. 'Well—so long,' he said, holding out his hand. 'We'll meet soon and have a crack.' I saw that my news about Pengelly had made him impatient. He had moved instinctively towards the door of the flat close to us. Someone was inside there to whom he must give information. But I couldn't lose sight of him without a clue to the others.

'Look here,' I said. 'Where are we going to meet, and when?'

'What's your telephone number?' he answered, his eyes both on the staircase and the flat-door.

'I haven't got one. . . . I'm passing through London. But I could meet you anywhere.'

'All right.' I could see how urgent he was to be rid of me. 'Ring me up at the Regent Palace any time before eleven.'

I nodded, and then, without any warning, the roar of an angry sea was in my ears, a long cold serpent coiling tightly round my stomach, and Charlie Buller turned into a scarecrow. Also the electric light danced gaily about the floor. I tottered. He caught me in his arms.

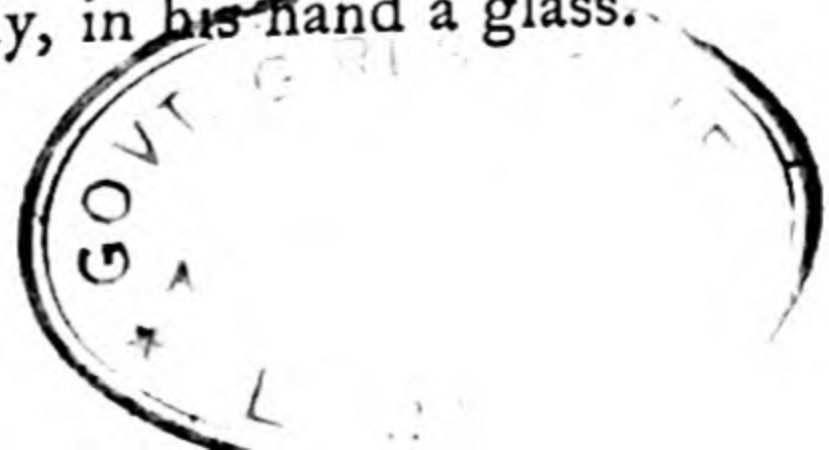
'Hullo . . . what's up?' With all the strength that I had I tried to stiffen my spine, to beat down the lights, to stifle the roar. Through it all I could smell the rough tweed of Charlie's clothes.

'I can't—no food——' I muttered, and sank into a black well of infinite depth.

The first sight after that I had was of a magnificent old secretaire. This thing towered above me. Looking up I could take in all the details, its ancient black wood, the beautiful carving of the old brass handles, but especially the lovely little pictures in white and red ivory with which every one of its multitudinous little doors was faced. These pictures danced before my eyes, but with all the seriousness of semi-consciousness I was gravely tracing them out—there were scenes of hunts, men chasing the deer, of ladies in towering head-dresses leaning over high balconies, of armoured knights jousting in tournament, of winding rivers and delicately shaped hills, and all toned to a lovely old richness that harmonised perfectly with the deep ebony of the wooden panels.

Then I looked further, half-raising myself, and stared straight into the eyes of Osmund.

He was standing high above me, watching me very gravely, in his hand a glass.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'Here, drink some more of this,' he said, giving me the glass; and the sound of his voice—deep, gentle, exceedingly harmonious—brought back the old days, the old events, until they seemed to be gathered crowding about me. Oh! but I was glad to see him.

I drank the brandy. My head cleared. My one thought then was that he shouldn't think that I had planned this faint as a ruse. 'I couldn't help it,' I said, sitting up; 'I didn't mean to. I've been so busy, I haven't eaten anything. Overtaxed myself.' I remember so well that ridiculous excuse, the poor effort of the remnants of my pride.

He put his hand on my shoulder.

'That's all right, Dick,' he said. 'We're very glad to see you. There's some food here at your side. Have some grub before you talk.'

With that I am free to confess that I forgot everything save the food. I can taste it still—the cold ham, the bread and butter, cold chicken, Gruyère. . . . They say that a starving man must eat penuriously. There wasn't, I fear, much caution about myself that evening. I swallowed the food like a wolf.

All the time Osmund stood watching me, not saying a word. I finished: I lay back on the sofa, my hands above my head, with a sigh of content. Then I looked up at him, smiling; then, at last, in full control of my faculties, I sat up, facing him.

'Thanks,' I said. 'Now I'll go. You're busy. But let me see you later on. I've been wanting to tumble against you for donkey's years.'

'Have you, Dick?' He stood there, still star-

ing at me in that same odd, grave, contemplative way. 'Well, now you've found me, what's been happening to you?'

'Oh, I don't know,' I answered. 'One thing and another. It isn't too easy these days for a man of my age. . . .' But I wasn't going to expose my poverty. I remember feeling that I'd rather lose sight of Osmund and Helen at once and for ever than that they should spy out my nakedness. I climbed to my feet. 'I'll be off,' I said. 'Thanks for the meal. We'll have dinner one night, shall we? Come and dine with me somewhere. We'll talk over old times.'

'Yes,' he said, still staring at me. 'I've had two years in gaol, you know. That gives a man something to talk about. . . .' Then, as though he had just made up his mind to something, he put both his hands on my shoulders and pushed me down on to the sofa again. 'You stay here for a bit. I need your company.'

He gave me a cigarette and sat down on the sofa near to me. Then we looked at one another. He was vast as he lounged back sprawling on that sofa, his great legs stuck forward, his head up with that gesture that I remembered so well, his eyes half closed, staring at me from under the lids. His dark hair was flecked now with grey; his eyes were as beautiful, as large and clear, as audacious and courageous as ever they had been. At first I thought that there was nothing very much altered about him, save his mouth. The change in that I noticed at once. It had been in the old days careless, casual and friendly. Now it

was hard and would have been relentless and almost cruel had not the lips, even as I watched, moved a little and their lines shifted to uncertainty and hesitation. His eyes, too, shifted; after a short look from me they dropped and refused to meet mine. Where had I quite recently seen just that same shyness? Why, of course, Charlie Buller . . . and with that I knew also the reason of the similarity. He had also been making his inspection of me.

'Well, Dick—so you've turned up again. You're looking pretty fit whatever you've been doing. Hair a bit long, which it usedn't to be.'

Then, quite without warning, he gripped my hand. 'I'm damn glad to see you. I've missed you a lot.'

But he hadn't. I knew at once even as he spoke those words that he wasn't thinking of what he was saying, that when he had gripped my hand he was expressing some emotion that hadn't anything to do with myself. Even in the old days he had had the irritating habit of allowing his mind to run ahead of what he was actually saying. This had grown on him apparently. But suddenly he jumped up, walked about the room as though he were looking for something, then went to the door, glanced out of it, closed it very carefully, and came back to me.

'Sorry,' he said, sitting down beside me. 'But I'm half-expecting someone.'

'Yes, I told Buller——' I began. Then I stopped. I wasn't going to be the first to mention Pengelly.

'Buller went out for a minute. He'll be back.' Then he tried to concentrate on me. 'Now, Dick,' he said. 'Fire away. Tell me all about yourself—all your adventures. You're as fat as ever, you old pig. Been doing yourself proud? Married yet?'

No, I was not married yet, but I didn't tell him the reason. I began a long rigmarole, but neither of us was attending. My nerves were on edge. For what? I don't know. Looking back, I try hard to recover every moment of that important half-hour. For one thing, I was, I fancy, expecting that at any moment Charlie Buller would enter, and for another I had the consciousness that that swine Pengelly was skulking behind the curtains somewhere.

Of course he wasn't. But I couldn't rid myself of the sense and smell of him. And all the time Osmund's fingers were tapping restlessly on the arm of the sofa.

'And so I've been living in Westminster lately,' I added at last, lamely. 'Quite a decent place. Nice woman—food not bad as those things go——'

Osmund nodded his head. 'I know,' he said. But he'd only caught the last words. 'As things go, but I tell you what, Dick, things go damnably. Damnably, that's the way they go. Wait a minute. Do you hear anything?'

He held up his hand. I must confess that what I heard was my heart beating like a pendulum clock. 'What do you expect me to hear?' I asked at last.

'The crowd,' he answered.

'The crowd?' I repeated feebly.

'Yes, the crowd,' he answered impatiently. With a swift movement he jumped up, went to the window, and flung it open.

'Now listen,' he said. There came up to us all the murmur of the Circus. Like the sea it was, coming in with a regular beat and rhythm, 'Tip-Top, Tip-Top, Tip-Top,' and this was broken into by the cry of a motor horn, the distant shout of the calling of the evening papers, the muffled ringing of a church bell—and I seemed to hear also a plaintive undertone as though some giant were whimpering.

He banged the window down again. He came back to me and stood in front of me.

'There you are,' he cried. '*You* can't hear it with the windows shut, but I can—night and day. It never stops.'

'What do you live here for,' I asked him, 'if it bothers you so? There are plenty of quiet streets.'

'That wouldn't make any difference,' he answered. 'They'd be there just the same. It's the thought of them, all alike, all thinking the same things, all doing the same things, all dirty, diseased, making love, eating, drinking, sleeping ——' He broke off. 'Don't think I've gone crazy. I haven't. But that time in prison gave me a turn about crowds. I always had it in a way. Since I was a kid I've always wondered that people weren't better-looking, didn't care for themselves more. Yes, and why they didn't get rid of the unfit and all the rotters—just shove them into a

lethal chamber. . . . I'm a rotter myself, of course. Deserve extinction as much as anybody. But I'm quite ready to be put away if someone decided. . . .' He broke off, and smiled in just his old charming way. 'Aren't I an ass, Dick? But I always was, and gaol didn't improve me. I wonder you come near me.'

'No,' I answered him; 'but what I can't understand is why, if you feel like that, you've pitched on this place for a flat, in the very middle of all the racket.'

'Ah, you see,' he answered, nodding his head. 'But I wanted to beat it. When I first came out I tried to live in the country, but they all knew about me, and I felt as though I had the plague. So then I shifted to Spain. There I was quiet enough. A beautiful country—beautiful. . . . But I was an exile all the same. I had to come home. I had crazy notions about all sorts of things. And then I joined up, of course; changed my name, and by that time they wanted men so badly they didn't bother to ask whether I'd been in quod or no. I was in France two years. And not a thing touched me. Not a thing. I'd have been glad enough to die, but my life was charmed. Well, in 'Eighteen I came home and, knowing how my feelings were, I set out to beat them. And sometimes I have. And then again—sometimes I haven't.'

I've tried here to recover an impression of the spirit behind the words rather than the words themselves. But that is hard indeed to recover. There was something so touching, so alarming,

and yet, in spite of its indecision, so determined in the force with which Osmund spoke.

He spoke himself of 'nerves' and 'feelings,' and I felt as I listened that everything that had sensitiveness in him was on edge, straining at the leash (to mix my metaphors), for some crisis of dramatic action. But not an action unpremeditated. I realised that what he said about the 'crowd' and the rest was true enough, but that it was only a background behind some act that he was contemplating. I realised that I had, by a chance, tumbled in at this very hour upon some dramatic event.

Even the room that we were in seemed to encourage me in this belief. There was very little furniture in it. The superb secretaire with the pictured doors of red and white ivory, a long bare refectory table, three chairs with gilt backs; on the bare, stained floor two rugs, ragged and torn, but of a lovely deep peach colour; an ancient silver stand for holding bible or prayer-book from some old church, two very old silver candlesticks—but the oddest thing about the room was the walls, that were rough with uneven patches of white and grey on them just as the workmen would leave them after preparing them for distemper. On one of the walls was a mirror of gilded wood, with that beautiful glimmer of rose-colour in it that the old Spanish wood-carving so often has. On another wall was a fine triptych in Limoges enamel, with deep burning blues and greens in it—on the other walls, nothing.

Over everything there was an odd air of dust, as though no one cared for the room properly, and this was strange, for Osmund had been always meticulously spruce and clean about himself and his surroundings. This led me to look at him more closely, and I realised that he was not now himself as smartly brushed and cared-for as he used to be.

The collar of his coat was dusty, his tie a little crooked, his trousers a trifle baggy.

He had sat down beside me again, and had his hand on my arm.

'I'll tell you something, Dick. In that cabinet there (pointing to the secretaire) I've got a revolver, always loaded. And one day I shouldn't wonder but that I'll lean over the wall and look down into that damned Circus and take a pot at one or two of them. No, I'm not mad—far from it. It would be a sort of protest against this modern rush, noise, screaming and shrieking. Everything's gone from the world, Dick, that made it worth while—all beauty and repose, all craftsmanship and originality. Men move like sheep pushing after one another through the same hole in the same fence.

'It will be worse and worse unless someone makes an example, pulls things up for a moment. There they go, round and round the Circus, jumping the hoops, grinning the same silly grins. And the noise never stops, never stops. I lie awake at night listening to it. Rumble—rumble—rumble. Rustle—rustle—rustle, and the little man there was once, so grave, so quiet, working

away in his room on a piece of wood, or a fragment of stone, making something beautiful out of it, he's dead, Dick—dead and buried, and everyone's forgotten where his grave is.'

'All the same,' I said, 'I can't see that potting a few stray unfortunate people out of the window is going to help matters much.'

'No—neither it will.' He shook himself briskly, flung back his head as though he'd suddenly waked from a dream. 'Neither it will. I talk an awful lot of rot sometimes. I haven't seen you for so long. That's my excuse. Hullo! here's Charlie!'

The door opened and Buller came in. He started on seeing me. He hadn't expected, I suppose, to find me still there, and the words that he had intended to speak died on his lips.

We all three waited in silence. It was an awkward moment for me. Something was going on in which I had no part. So once more I said good-bye.

'Let's meet soon——'

Osmund stopped me. In those moments he had made up his mind. 'No, hang on a minute, Dick. I think you can help us.'

'What is it?' I asked.

'As a matter of fact, you've tumbled in on a little plot. Nothing much, but you may as well know.'

Buller made a movement.

'It's all right, Charlie. Dick's an old friend of the firm. You see, Dick, we're a bit excited this evening, Charlie and I, because in another

hour or so we're hoping to have a little talk with our old friend, Mr. Pengelly.'

I nodded. 'I know. I saw Pengelly hanging about outside.'

'Yes. Exactly. He'd come up, I suppose, to see how the land lay. We've been waiting for this meeting a long time, Charlie and Hench and I. We owe Pengelly something—and the rum thing is that it's he who has asked for the meeting.'

He was another Osmund now, with no nonsense about revolvers and crowds. He was smiling, his eyes were dancing, the old boyish gaiety that I had found so attractive in former days was here again.

'Yes. Would you believe it? He had the cheek to write to Charlie three weeks ago—to suggest a meeting, said he had something important to suggest—*that* after the way he landed us! Well, Charlie brought the letter to me, and —I—I've arranged that he shall have a talk with all three of us.'

'What are you going to do to him?' I asked.

'Do? Oh, I don't know. We'll see. Frighten him a bit. He deserves it. He——'

Then we all stiffened. Someone was turning a key in the outer door.

We all looked round. There were steps, a pause, then the handle of the door of our room was turned.

Staring, I found myself looking, wonder of wonders at last, into the eyes of Helen Cameron.

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CHAPTER IV

THE TEA-SHOP

When I looked at her I felt such happiness surge up within me that I could be conscious of no other feeling whatever.

And here I must interpolate this—namely, that throughout all the extraordinary incidents that followed, horrible, ludicrous, terrifying or beautiful, my own feeling was in the main one of happiness. If this chronicle does not treat death and the anticipation of death as seriously as it should do, I am sorry, and I make my apologies, but the fact is that, throughout this incredible evening, death seemed to me quite unimportant, just as, at certain great moments in the war, it seemed quite unimportant.

But, as you will see, it did not seem unimportant to Hench, for instance, nor at one moment to Pengelly.

In fact, the way that the imminence of it took us all in different fashion is one of the reasons for this narrative. For myself, there is just this to be said, that from this instant of meeting Helen again until that last mad moment among the roofs and chimneys, although I had many other emotions

as well, my principal dominating one was of overwhelming, almost triumphant, happiness, although what I had for most of the time to be triumphant about, Heaven only knows.

If I was surprised to see Helen, that was nothing to the surprise that she felt at seeing me.

'Dick!' she cried, and for a moment she could not move. Then she stepped forward and took my hand. We stood there looking at one another like two children, smiling, almost giggling.

The first thing she said was what Osmund had said.

'Dick! Your hair wants cutting.'

'That's what I told him,' Osmund said. At the sound of his deep, penetrating voice I was recalled to a wider consciousness of the world and its affairs. I was aware of a number of rather exciting things, as, for instance, that neither Osmund nor Charlie Buller had expected Helen to appear, that they were greatly disconcerted by her appearance, that Helen had not expected to find Charlie there and was annoyed at his company, and that every piece of furniture in that dusty room seemed to be aware of what was going on.

I took in something, too, of the change in Helen. She looked older, of course. That one must expect. She was slimmer even than before, so slim and slight that she was like the dark stem of some lovely flower—some pale slender flower, strong and reposing quietly in its beauty. She

wore clothes of the same character as of old, altered to the times, of course, but dark, cut for efficiency and discipline, giving, in spite of all her femininity, almost the effect of uniform. In her face was all the kindliness and gentleness that I had so long treasured, but also the austerity, the irony, and now, added to these, a maturity, a sternness of self-discipline, that had not been there before. And on her finger was a plain gold wedding-ring. Helen Cameron no longer, then—Helen Osmund. . . .

I had known that it must be so, but something —some wild, unreasoned hope—sank in me now at the positive proof of it.

Osmund was watching her.

'Why, Helen,' he cried. 'How delightful to see you! What's brought you?'

She stood looking at all of us and smiling, taking off her gloves. Then she sat down and, with a quiet, leisurely movement that showed she was quite at home there, pulled off her little soft mouse-grey hat.

'I'm only up for the night,' she said. 'But I was suddenly bored this afternoon. Mopsett *can* be boring, John, you know, and I thought that a little shopping to-morrow morning would do me good, cheer me up. But don't *you* worry. Clare's in town. I rang her up from Mopsett. We're going to dine together—eight o'clock in her flat.'

Osmund, while she was speaking, seemed to have made up his mind. 'Right,' he said; 'that's fine.'

'Well, I'll go and wash.' But when she stood up she turned to me, her whole face glowing with pleasure at seeing me. I thought there was relief there, too, as though my presence were in some way going to help her.

'But you, Dick! That you should be here like this! It's incredible! I've wondered about you again and again, where you were, what you were doing. . . .' She broke off, I remember, at that, aware perhaps of all the strange and possibly terrible ways her life had been twisting since our last meeting, much aware, also, by bitter experience, that people did not now rush to 'meet' herself and Osmund—quite the contrary.

Nevertheless, she had only to look at me to see the wild, tempestuous happiness I felt at finding her again. I didn't attempt to hide it. I should have been wiser, possibly, and later events might have been different, if I had. Not that Osmund, at this time, saw anything; he was busy just now with quite other thoughts.

She moved to the door.

'You're not going at once, Dick, are you? We've got to have a tremendous talk. I've got to know about everything—your most intimate secrets.'

'You shall know everything,' I assured her.

When she was gone and the door closed behind her we three stood looking at one another.

Osmund swayed on his huge legs, frowning, then he turned to me. 'Look here, Dick. There

isn't very much time. Helen's turning up unexpectedly has rather complicated things. Would you like to help us out?'

'In what way?' I asked him.

'It's like this. I was telling you about Pengelly when Helen came in. Our little interview with him won't be quite complete unless Hench is also there. Hench perhaps most of all, because he's suffered most.

'Now I was to have met Hench at a tea-place by the Omnibus Theatre at six-thirty. Helen is here, and I'd rather stay with her as things are turning out. Buller has a job on. Would you do that for us—go to the "Green Plate," meet Hench there, and bring him here?'

'The "Green Plate"?' I asked.

'Yes, yes,' Osmund answered impatiently—I saw that he was on edge lest Helen should return—'it's just round the corner from the Circus, Lower Regent Street, next the Omnibus Theatre. There's an old man in fancy dress at the door, with a placard on a pole—the tea-shop is on the second floor. You can't miss it.'

'What am I to say to Hench?' I asked.

'Simply say that I couldn't come, that I'd been intending to bring him on here to tea instead of having it there.'

I remember that I asked then whether Hench had been told about Pengelly. Yes, Osmund said, he knew that this was something to do with Pengelly. He had been longing for years to meet him again and tell him what he thought of him, but at the same time he was frightened of him. Funny

chap, Hench. Of course I remembered him. Well, he was funnier now—a lot funnier—especially since his wife died.

I said that I didn't know that he had a wife. Yes, Osmund said, a splendid woman. They had been devoted to one another. She had stuck to him all the time he'd been in prison, and then died a week after he came out.

Very bad luck.

Very bad luck, I repeated.

Well, there it was. Osmund didn't want to waste time with stories about Hench's wife. The point was, would I go?

Then once more I asked my great question. I remember that I dropped my voice as though all the world were at my elbow.

'Look here,' I asked, 'what do you mean to do to Pengelly?'

'Do?' repeated Osmund. 'Nothing. Only give him a fright.' Then he added, in a low monotone as though he were speaking to himself, 'I want to know—we all want to know—why he did what he did.'

His words seemed to have an echo—the furniture—the beautiful secretaire, the old silver candlesticks, the gilt chairs seemed to repeat:

'We all want to know—why he did what he did.'

And even—it wasn't at the time too fanciful a notion—it seemed to me that the Circus itself rose up to the windows and repeated—'We all want to know—why he did what he did.'

Well, I wanted also to know—I wanted to

know that and a great many other things as well. I said I would go to meet Hench.

When I was outside the flat and starting down the dark staircase I found that I was incredibly refreshed. Now this was odd. I had been on my legs all day. I had been worried and troubled almost to insanity. Only an hour ago I had fainted from hunger, and yet, as I went down that staircase, I seemed to have wings.

I was fancying that I was taking Helen with me, and that thought, untrue in every sense though it was, gave me a fiery elation so that I was ready for anyone or anything.

It was this light-headedness that made me step out of the building into the street as though I were going to strike off, swimming with my head up, through a glorious sea of shining waters. I had not at the time considered it, but in looking back now I suddenly realised that Osmund's room had been lit only by candles in the silver candlesticks. The staircase had been dimly dark, and now I was almost, for a moment, blinded by the lights of the Circus.

I had reached the moment—it always seems to me a moment, as though some vast dominant giant had snapped out a word of command—when all the shops close their doors and thousands and thousands of human beings pour out into the streets.

London suddenly, after being a place of mystery where every sort of transaction, dangerous, evil, generous, impulsive, cruel, foolish, disastrous, helpful, is carried through in coloured caves

defended by dark doors, is turned upside down, inside out, and everything that was hidden and mysterious is open and mysterious instead.

The same game is played as before, but now all the rules are different, and these engagements, these contracts, these purchases and agreements, these plots and duels, are worked out in the open, under blazing lights, before everyone's eyes, and the rule is that everyone must keep moving, no one must be still for a single moment. Perhaps it is that which decides who shall be the masters of the world—those clever ones who are able to get their way as easily in the enclosed corner as in the shining blazing open. Life, indeed, if it is to be conquered, demands every kind of clever trick.

I felt at that moment, for the first time for many months, that I could conquer it.

There they all were, out in the open, making the Circus ring with their tramping. It was no longer a dim pool to which the animals came to drink their fill, but rather, under the dazzling and jumping lights, a hard and shining arena, upon whose stage everyone was engaged in attempting to win the game. The game that I was out to win, I realised with a start of surprise, was Osmund's. I can't possibly convey to you with how extraordinary a force, as I hesitated on the edge of the kerb, brushed on every side by these hurrying eager phantoms, I seemed to feel his body, dark, gigantic, winged, careen with its spreading shadow over all the Circus. He hung like a great bird over us all, watching me to see that I did his bidding. At that, I remember that just before I

stepped out into the centre of the arena I did for a moment hesitate and wonder what I was doing in this affair. What was it that Buller and Osmund were planning? Why was the miserable Pengelly skulking about those stairs? Would it not be better for me to leave the whole mysterious business and go my own way? Then I thought of Helen—Helen in that flat with Osmund who did not want her, alone, unwitting, Pengelly round the corner. That decided me and I went forward.

As I pushed ahead and touched shoulders with the crowd I recovered my normal health. It was as though I had a moment before been sickening for influenza. Now, stopping once again—What, I asked myself, have I been making all this fuss about? Yes, I said, staring into the round rosy faces of two old women who, both short and fat, looked as though in another instant they would roll themselves like barrels through the crowd, what has there been in all this but the fact that, by accident, I have stumbled into a group of old friends and (thank God, thank God) am in touch once more with the woman I love? 'The woman I love!' I might have shouted out loud, so exalted and excited was I at the thought of Helen —'The woman I love,' I said, and plunged into the arena, like a gladiator, my sword flashing, my buckler agleam, while all the thumbs at all the upper windows prepared to turn themselves down!

At the Omnibus Theatre they were playing a comedy called 'Good-night, Charlie,' and there they were, rows of photographs with Charlie in

pyjamas and a pillow-case, and two ladies in two beds, and an old gentleman in a bath-chair—all doing the most natural things with that complete air of unreality that theatrical photographs always present. Out of the twirling door of the Omnibus Restaurant came two young men, arguing, I most clearly remember, about some hair-restorer. They were quite vexed with one another, and then in through the twirling door there pushed a disdainful stout lady with bright yellow hair, and a very thin old man, who was shivering with the cold. And it *was* cold. The snow, very gently, very softly, very kindly, was beginning to fall again.

Still on fire with my strange and unnatural happiness, I turned the corner and very easily found the 'Green Plate'.

In the doorway was a sort of Father Christmas, a peaked hat of dirty grey on his head, his woolly beard a little askew and the hand that held the advertising sign extremely dirty.

On the sign was printed 'YE GREENE PLATE,' and then a picture of the same. As I passed the old man he dug out from the pocket of his very shabby gown a very dirty handkerchief and proceeded to lift his beard that he might the better blow his nose. You say that I cannot after these years remember that old man's beard? Wait and see whether I had not cause to remember it!

I climbed the staircase and found myself inside a room that was littered with little tables and quite empty save for two waitresses who sat together in a corner like wax figures from Madame Tussaud's.

It was, of course, not the hour for any sort of

meal. Here the cave was empty. All the action of life had passed into the open. I sat down at a table near the window. One of the automata approached me, yawning behind her hand. I ordered a pot of tea and a muffin. She passed, still yawning, to a hole in the wall, and, galvanised into a sudden almost unearthly excitement (as though I had whispered in her ear that the Last Trump was about to sound), shouted down it, 'Pototeamuffin—ONE,' then wandered back to her chair, where she took on again the waxen immobility of a dummy.

I looked through my window on to walls that were like rough and jagged rocks. Here the light was dim, figures passed like shades, and you might see at any moment old Charon approach with his boat. The prehistoric monsters played up the hill, and at the edge of the rocky cliffs you could hear the dim 'flap-flap' of the sluggish waters.

Then the door was pushed open and Hench came in. He was not difficult to recognise—that big, flabby, misshapen body like a bolster, with the small round head set on the top of it, and on the head perched a bowler ridiculously minute. It was characteristic of him that he should carry an umbrella, untidily folded, that bulged like a cabbage. He exactly resembled, as he stood there, a figure of the music-halls, stout in the wrong places, unhappy, bewildered, about to burst into a piping and desperate little song.

He looked about him, opened his mouth at the sight of the two waitresses, shut it again, then saw

me. Like Charlie Buller he failed to recognise me. He was moving towards another place. I got up and came to meet him, and we stood together in the middle of the desert of the little tables like Stanley meeting Livingstone.

'Hullo, Hench!' I cried. 'Don't you remember me?'

He stared, gaped, dropped his umbrella, picked it up again:

'No,' he said in his funny emasculated voice. 'I'm afraid . . .'

'Dick Gunn,' I said.

He jumped almost out of his fat skin then, was as shy, confused, pleased and apprehensive as a girl at her first party. I could see at once that he wasn't sure (that he hadn't been sure, poor devil, for many a day) whether I or anyone else would care to be found speaking to him in public. So I reassured him by catching his arm and pulling him with me over to my table by the window. He sat down without a word: the automaton appeared, and I ordered tea and a muffin for him.

'Are you hungry? Would you like a poached egg or something?' I asked him.

'No, no,' he said hurriedly. 'Indeed, no. Not at all.'

I proceeded at once (because he was shaking with apprehension) to explain things to him. He had been expecting to meet Osmund here, but Osmund was detained and wanted me to take him on to the flat—only a yard away, across the Circus.

He was, it seemed, completely overwhelmed by my appearance. I was the very last person he

had expected to see. He had been in two minds whether he would come at all.

'Yes—you see, Gunn, meeting Osmund again after all this time—what I mean to say—it's bringing back unhappy memories, very unhappy indeed.'

'Haven't you seen him, then,' I asked, 'since——?' I paused.

'No,' Hench broke in hurriedly. 'Not for five years—that is, for nearly five. The last time was at Eastbourne, quite by accident—on the Front. We had a little talk. I mean, you couldn't call that a *real* meeting——'

'No, you couldn't,' I agreed seriously.

To give any real impression of Hench's conversation is very difficult. It was the oddest, strangest kind of twittering, as though a canary had escaped from its cage and were trying to tell one about his imprisonment. But this small, shrill, wandering, little voice came out of a body that might have been magnificent had it been properly cared for.

Hench was, I suppose, every bit of six foot, and broad with it, but he was made of that dull white, doughy kind of fat that runs into little rolls of flesh at the back of the neck, under the eyes, between the fingers. His hair also was so light-coloured as to be almost invisible. In his bath he must have looked like an enormous upright bolster. Yet his was not an unpleasant face; it was kindly, honest, genuine. Now, with his many troubles, it was overclouded with a shadow of nervous unhappiness. And he moved, as I had already

noticed in Osmund and Buller, as though he belonged to some sect apart from the common race of men.

As a matter of fact, I saw in another moment an expression that transformed him.

'What does Osmund ask me for?'

'He wants you to meet Pengelly,' I answered shortly.

Then I saw a change!

He became in a flash a dangerous animal. His body seemed to stiffen, his hand straightened out, hard and taut, against the table.

'Pengelly . . .' he repeated. 'At last . . . he's turned up again.'

He forgot me, I think, for a moment or two; just sat there, his head bent forward, thinking, remembering. The waitress brought us our food. I busied myself with it. Hench swallowed his tea blindly, without knowing what he was doing. Then he began in a strange, trembling monotone, staring before him out beyond the window to those dark rocky cliffs and the flowing Styx. Once and again he dropped an 'h,' once and again he muddled a word, but, as I remember it, it flowed on in a scarcely hindered stream as though I had turned a handle and this were a recorded disc.

'You were always a good friend to me, Gunn, or I think you were. What I mean to say, it's hard to know, after all that's happened, who you *can* trust. But I don't care—you can't do me any 'arm now. Nobody can. I mean to say, it's too late now for anything to matter much.'

He went back then to the very beginning of the story, how he and his wife and kid had been up against things, didn't know where to turn for a job.

'You can't judge me, Gunn,' I remember his saying, 'because you've never been up against it, and until a fellow has been it isn't fair to talk.' (Lord, if he only knew!) Well, then he met Charlie Buller, an old acquaintance, and Buller invited him down to the seaside to talk things over. Down he went, and soon he saw what Buller was after. Now the thing that he most urgently wanted to explain to me was that neither Buller nor himself had intended to 'do anything really dirty.' It had begun with some grudge that Buller had against Borlass. He wanted to give the conceited swine a bit of a fright. Hench had to admit that after a while it became something much more concrete than that. He couldn't deny, when I put it to him, that they had intended to rob Lady Borlass of some of her jewels, and then, driven into a corner, he fell back on the old 'Robin Hood' line of argument that the Borlass party was rich and disgusting and mean, and that here was he with his wife and kid starving. . . .

'All right,' I broke in. 'We can cut all that, Hench. I'm not saying that I wouldn't have robbed Lady Borlass myself if I'd had the chance. Drop the excuses.'

But he wouldn't and he couldn't. I could see that this had been, for years now, with him a constant and persistent preoccupation, that he had

gone over the same ground again and again and again, that in the long sleepless nights his soul, alone with its Maker in the bitter dark, wailed out its excuses and found in that wailing no possible sort of comfort. No, he was not a villain, poor Hench, nor ever intended for one.

I moved him on at last, and it was plain enough that his final action had been determined by Buller's highly coloured picture of Borlass's villainy (for Borlass was no villain, only a fool), his consciousness of the hunger of his wife and child, and, by far the strongest influence, quite outweighing all the rest, his worship of Osmund.

Yes, worship, it seems, was not too strong a word for his feeling for Osmund at that time. Osmund had seemed to him simply the most miraculous creation, a kind of God in human form. Osmund was everything that Hench was not, a gentleman, of magnificent physique, of superb courage, infinite wisdom—and so on, and so on.

When Hench learnt that Osmund was also of the venture he hesitated no longer. He realised, of course, that Osmund was going into it from no common motives of burglary, that it was from hatred of Borlass, and from a kind of mad, wild desire 'to do him one in the eye.' Hench had always afterwards believed (and in this he was, I daresay, correct) that Osmund would have prevented any real robbery, and would have turned the whole affair into some wild, desperate practical joke, stripping Borlass naked and throwing him into the garden-pond, or tying him to the dining-table, something crazy, childish and vain.

In any case, the theme changed to Pengelly, and here I saw at once that on this subject Hench was not sane. He became now strangely unreal, as though the true normal Hench had jumped out of the window into the Styx and his place had been taken by a quivering madman whose brain was quietly boiling with insanities.

He considered, you see, that Pengelly was the murderer of his wife.

At the mention of his wife his face, pale in any case, was drained of all shadow of colour.

'You see, Gunn, she was a wonderful woman. You never saw her. What I mean to say, you couldn't really appreciate her without seeing her. She was one of those women who, the worse things are, the fonder they get of you. She didn't want to marry me at first, and I'm sure I couldn't blame 'er. I asked her six times over before she'd listen, and then it was to escape her stepmother as much as anything. What I mean is she wasn't really happy at home—not likely to be with her father giving in to his second wife over everything and never considering his children.

'Anyway she came to me the sixth time I asked her, and from that moment we were the happiest pair in England. Never a cross word. She was an angel if ever there was one.'

He paused to wipe his forehead, on which there were beads of perspiration. His appearance was no longer ludicrous to me. I knew again that there was something here deeply real, and something close to me, for which I could feel, in my own way, a sort of protective affection.

'You see, Gunn, she believed in me right away from the very beginning when nobody else did. I wouldn't be where I am now, wouldn't 'ave 'ad any of that special printing knowledge I got if she hadn't urged me on and seen where my tastes lay. What I mean is there's nothing like a woman whom you're in love with for making a man believe in himself if she wants to. . . . And she made me believe in myself. Then we had our kid, the prettiest little girl, Gunn, she was, and after that everything went wrong.

'I lost my job at the printing works in Reading through no fault of my own, both the wife and child fell ill, and I got sort of desperate. It wouldn't 'ave been so bad if Clara had been up and about, but with her sick and the child not having enough to eat—what I mean is that it would drive any man sort of desperate—and I never was as strong a character as Clara wanted me to be——'

No, he wasn't a strong character, and he was a good deal weaker now than he had been then. Kindliness and friendliness had been, I daresay, his undoing. Anything to make people pleased with him. A despicable desire, the sterner ironist may declare, but all the nicest people suffer from it.

Yes, he was off his head with worry, and so the rest easily followed. He went down to Howlett and fell under the influence first of Buller and then, far more thoroughly, of Osmund. One of the chief attractions that Osmund had for him was that his wife, Clara, would have thought the world of him.

He was exactly the kind of man that she had always been hoping Hench would one day have as a friend. His imagination united Clara and Osmund together in a sort of sentimental embrace —his wife and his best friend—all three of them passing blissfully to the Elysian Fields together!

Poor Hench! It turned out for him far otherwise. First Osmund, then Pengelly, and ruin in their train.

He made no excuses for himself save this poor futile argument that he and Charlie Buller had never really intended 'to do anything dirty.' But the villainy of Pengelly left him bewildered. Like Osmund, he wanted to know what made him do it. Certainly not a love of law and order, for a more abandoned scoundrel than Pengelly you couldn't find anywhere. He had been betraying them, it seemed, from the very first, urging Buller on, making it all easy, arranging with someone to take the stuff after it had been stolen. It was not greed of money that attracted him, it was not even hatred of Osmund, whom from the first moment he detested: he had, it seemed, arranged to betray Buller and Hench long before he knew that Osmund was to be in the affair.

All incredible, all motiveless. 'What I mean,' said Hench, 'is that we weren't worth all his trouble—we weren't important enough. Anyway that's how it was . . . and Clara stuck to me all the time I was in prison and died a week after I came out.'

She died thinking that Pengelly was still pursuing them. She was haunted by the face and

voice of Pengelly, and she would cry out his name in her sleep and shiver with terror of him in her last delirium.

After her death Hench simply waited for the day when he would meet Pengelly again. All through his regular quiet life—for he found work with people who trusted him, and rose steadily in their esteem, all through the unvarying loneliness of his days—his child had died when he was in prison—this thought had persisted that the time would come when he would meet Pengelly face to face and tell him what he thought of him. But for years he never heard of him nor of Buller, and had only that one meeting with Osmund at Eastbourne. Then had come a line from Osmund asking for this rendezvous, and at last from my lips he had learnt the reason of it.

Now, as I sat opposite him at this shabby little table, some of the hatred that he had for Pengelly passed to myself. I had always loathed him, but now it was as though I, too, had been betrayed by him, and I, too, had waited all these years to repay a little of what I owed.

And I felt also some of that struggle that was going on in Hench's heart, the struggle between his natural sentimental love for his fellow human beings, his desire to be liked by them and to like them in return, and this hot, corroding hatred that never left him, that turned and turned in his heart like a wild animal lying uneasily there.

'Well, I'll come,' said Hench, staring beyond me into space. 'I'll see Osmund again—yes, and Pengelly too.'

Then, as I rose up to pay the bill, I knew that I was at last being drawn into their affair, that there was no escape for me. I had an odd breathlessness as though I had been running.

Yes, there was no doubt about it. I was in it now—up to the neck.

CHAPTER V

PENGELLY ON EARTH

As we passed by Father Christmas into the open air, I realised that it had become, during this last half-hour, very much colder.

Snow was now falling with a soft determination, settling against the cheek like the touch of a dove's wing, touching the hand with an intimacy that seemed to be the privilege of oneself alone.

The air was colder, and the arena wore now a fiercer colour. Through the snow all the sky-signs danced in a fresh activity, and the white surface that began thinly to encrust the paths and borders made the walls and roofs velvet in a dim and gentle dusk. The hour of release from the caves had completely passed, and now the arena was filled with figures all bent upon the warfare of the evening—warfare of all kinds, duels between man and woman, between woman and woman, dog and rat, elephant and spider, boa-constrictor and rhinoceros. All the combatants could be seen moving to their especial places, and over everything there was the pause and hush of preparation.

I had my own drama to prepare for, but at the moment my particular care was that Hench should come to no harm. I was aware that his nerves were in no very controlled state, that a talk with Pengelly after brooding on that very thing for so long might swing him easily into a world of uncontrolled melodrama. We had, in fact, almost immediately an instance of his nervousness.

As we passed the doors of the Omnibus Restaurant three young men in evening dress came hurrying out, very happy, very noisy, having started what would surely be a jolly evening in exactly the proper spirit.

Beyond the spinning doors they joined arm-in-arm, and, their top-hats a trifle tilted, came surging into us.

'Sorry, old top,' someone shouted.

Hench staggered back. He turned, trembling, on to them.

'Why can't you look where you're going?' he called out in his funny, tremulous, piping voice. 'Do you call that manners not to——'

But they were far beyond him, half-way across the Circus, gay, defiant gladiators, raising their swords to the Emperor and the thronging audience, ready, eager to meet with every challenger.

I caught his arm.

'All right, Hench,' I said, 'they're only a bit jolly.'

He was trembling all over. I caught suddenly some sense of his own fear. The Circus seemed to be, at that instant, crowded with shining,

ferocious, determined figures resolved that we should not pass. I caught his arm, feeling an odd tenderness and affection for him.

'It's all right, Hench,' I repeated. 'It's all right,' as though he had been a child. I conveyed him across, and brought him safely to the door.

Going up the dark, twisting staircase he explained. 'You see, Gunn, it means a good bit to me, this does. What I mean to say is that meeting Osmund and Buller again, well, it's like old times, and not very pleasant old times either.'

Half-way up, at the very spot where I had watched Pengelly listening, he paused, catching my arm.

'Look here, Gunn,' he said, 'I don't think I'll go on if you don't mind. I'm not quite myself to-night, and seeing Pengelly again I don't know what I mightn't do and say. I don't, really. What I mean is that I'm not in proper control of myself. I'm not, really.'

I quieted and soothed him. I assured him that nobody was going to harm Pengelly (I wasn't at all sure of this myself), that it would do him good to see his old friends again, that he had given his word to Osmund that he would see him. I persuaded him, and a moment later I rang the bell of Osmund's flat.

It was Buller who opened the door. Buller and Hench seemed glad to see one another.

'Hullo, Charlie.'

'Well, Percy, how are you? Come along in.'

We came in. Buller led Hench into the

sitting-room, then came back to me while I was hanging up my coat. He dropped his voice.

'I say, Gunn, wait a minute.' I paused. He told me then that Osmund had gone out with his wife. Osmund was very anxious that his wife should not meet Pengelly. 'A man's affair this,' I remember Buller's saying. 'We don't want any women around.' So Osmund had seen his wife safely to her destination. Osmund also did not want Hench to meet Pengelly before Osmund returned, so he, Buller, was going to take Hench out with him for half an hour to have a drink.

And that was where I came in. I was, after all, thoroughly 'in' this by this time. I had proved myself their friend—would I help them yet further? Would I stay in Osmund's flat and receive Pengelly when he came, see that he didn't get away?

'We don't want to frighten him,' Charlie Buller said. 'Just when he's been so kind as to like to see us again.'

'Look here, Charlie,' I said, 'I must get this clear. What are you and Osmund planning to do to Pengelly?'

'Nothing,' Buller answered. 'Nothing at all. We want to have a little talk with him, that's all.' He stood, his legs planted, sucking an imaginary straw. He grinned, came close to me, put his hand on my shoulder.

'You'd like to have a look at him yourself, wouldn't you?' he asked me.

'All right,' I said. 'I'll wait.'

A moment later Hench came out smiling. He seemed to have lost all his nervousness.

'Charlie and I are going out for a drink.' He nodded at me.

'All right,' I said.

But my word, it was funny when I was left alone in that flat! I don't know that ever before in my life I had experienced a queerer sensation. It isn't nearly enough to say that it was queer because of what I was expecting would shortly occur there, although there was something of that in it, nor that it was queer because of the effect that Osmund's personality cast over it, nor that it was queer because I was in any case wildly excited, a little light-headed with my starving, poverty, and joy that I had found Helen again. There was something besides these. I started a tour of inspection and the first thing that I saw was my volume of *Quixote* lying demurely on the gaunt refectory table. And wasn't I glad to see it! It was a reminder that this fantastic adventure into which I had plunged was only one facet of a life that was on the whole always normal and sane.

Sancho Panza's joy at seeing his ass returning to him again was not greater than mine at seeing Sancho Panza once more. It was a small flat; the sitting-room, two bedrooms, the bathroom and a minute kitchen. The smaller bedroom was plainly a servant's room from the photograph of a young woman all smiles and flowers on the dressing-table.

The larger bedroom was monastic in its simplicity. It led directly out of the sitting-room,

an important fact, as I was to discover later on in the evening. The floor was stained and its only covering was a Persian rug, a dull biscuit-gold in colour with little trees of a dark purple worked round the border. There was a small, very hard-looking bed of black wood, a chest of drawers with twisted handles of brass, a mirror of dark wood lined with silver, and some very old silver hair-brushes, badly dented. There was a cupboard and there were two cane-bottomed chairs. There were no pictures on the walls. The point of the room was that on the bed was lying a woman's hat, and on one of the chairs a pair of woman's gloves. Helen's! I picked up the gloves and put them in my pocket. It was so instinctive an act that now, looking back, I believe that I was unaware that I did it.

It was one of the many silly acts of my very silly life and I was to repent it sufficiently before all was over.

I went back to the sitting-room and stood in admiration before that secretaire of which I have already spoken. It was one of the loveliest things! The little red and white panels were as fresh as though they had been painted only yesterday, the pictures enchanting in their gaiety and fun; the whole effect of colour was so deep and rich that it seemed to stain all the room to a finer glow.

The thick purple curtains were not drawn. I went to the windows and looked out. The snow had for a moment ceased to fall. Although its covering of the Circus must have been very slight,

the white glow gave an iridescent shine to the air, and all the little black figures hurried like dolls pulled by hidden strings about the scene. How self-important they all were! I could fancy myself standing in the shadow of those curtains and, with a rifle, picking them off one after another. How ludicrous the sudden starts they would give, how silently they would lie like blots of ink against the snow, while over them the lights of the advertisements, the stars—the golden flask, the appearing and disappearing letters would move, the only live things in all the world.

Not that I was bloodthirsty—far, far from it—but from the height where I was nothing below me had human life. So God, yawning up on His lonely cloud, must so often feel!

The bell rang. It broke into the flat like a menacing tap on the shoulder. I went to the hall door, opened it, and there stood Pengelly.

It was my fate that evening to surprise my old friends, but I can have surprised none of them more than Pengelly. I thought for a moment that he was going to turn and run. He did, indeed, step back into the passage.

'Come in, Mr. Pengelly,' I said. 'You're expected.'

He looked me all over. How I detested him at that moment! Then he shrugged his shoulders.

'I hadn't expected to see *you*, Mr. Gunn,' he said. 'It's quite a long time since we last met.'

So long in fact that I had forgotten a peculiarity in his voice, a way that he had of sucking in a

word every once and again, as though it had escaped him by accident and he only caught it just in time.

'Yes,' I answered, standing aside to let him in. 'Better late than never.'

He gave me another look—malevolent, inquisitive and puzzled—then came inside.

He took off his hat and coat and stepped into the sitting-room. He moved always, as well I remembered, as though at any moment he might have to hide behind a curtain or a door. Now he stood there, his bony head bent forward, his thin arms and legs a little spread as though they too were listening.

'Doesn't Osmund keep any servants?' he asked.

'I really don't know,' I answered. 'But at the moment I'm the only person in the flat. You are a little early for your appointment.'

He said nothing to that, but looked all round the room like a dog sniffing.

'Funny thing. No electric light. Only candles.'

'Osmund's fancy, I daresay,' I answered. 'I expect he thinks his things look better in candle-light.'

Pengelly then picked up my *Quixote* from the table, and it was all I could do not to shout out that he was to leave it alone. However, he gave a contemptuous sniff and put it down again. Then he settled himself into the Spanish arm-chair, and his thin, mean little body seemed to curl itself up like an animal's, into a bony heap, and from this

his head, with protuberant, naked forehead and greedy, quivering nostrils, jutted out.

'Now, Mr. Gunn, I'd like to know what you're doing here,' he said.

I smiled. 'That's all right, Pengelly,' I answered. 'I'm Osmund's guest for the moment.'

'Well, it isn't all right,' he answered. 'I'm here on business with Buller and Osmund, and it's nobody else's affair.'

'Quite so,' I answered. 'It certainly isn't my affair, and I won't stay if I'm not wanted. But it will be twenty minutes or so before Osmund comes back, so we may as well put up with one another until then.'

He looked at me with scornful patronage.

'Fancy you turning up again. I've heard of you once or twice. Not been doing too well, have you?'

But it wasn't my purpose to quarrel with him just then. I wanted to know one or two things.

'No,' I answered. 'To tell you the truth, I haven't. As a matter of fact, that's what I wanted to speak to you about. When I heard that you were coming I hoped that there would be a chance of a word with you privately. I don't know what it is you're suggesting to Osmund and Buller, but I don't see why, if it's a good thing, I shouldn't be in on it too.'

Amazing is the vanity of man! A moment earlier he had been regarding me with the deepest suspicion—now, so deep and rooted was his conceit that, at one word from me, his suspicions

vanished. His contempt for me, however, only deepened.

He rubbed his thin long fingers together.

'So you're down and out, are you? Well, I'm not surprised. . . .' He became suddenly confidential. 'Look here. You can tell me something. I was taking a bit of a risk suggesting this meeting. Of course, Osmund and Buller only got what they were asking for over that burglary business. They'd have been caught anyway. But I couldn't expect them to feel especially friendly to me over it. Yes, it was a bit bold suggesting a meeting, but that's why I'm where I am to-day. I've taken risks all my life long and they've always come off. But you can tell me, Gunn. Ain't they sore about that old business?'

'They were a bit sore,' I answered, 'for a while. Naturally. They've always been puzzled why you let them in as you did.'

'I had my own reasons,' he answered, with immense self-satisfaction. 'As a matter of fact, I didn't do them any harm. They'd have been caught anyway. They were babies at it. And I did myself a bit of good—rather necessary for me just then, as it happened, to be in with the police.'

'I see,' I answered, nodding my head. 'Very clever of you.'

'And you think they're not sore any longer?'

'Oh, well,' I replied, 'it was all a long while ago. It's no use bearing grudges all your life.' He seemed to be greatly relieved.

'That's what I thought,' he said, sucking his words down his throat.

'All the same,' I went on, 'I'm not sure that they'll be eager to trust you again.'

'Oh, they needn't be afraid,' he said. 'I won't let them down this time. If they like, they're in for a good thing—a very good thing indeed.'

'What kind of a thing?' I asked, a trifle too eagerly perhaps.

He looked at me through his narrow, evil eyes, then shook his wicked head.

'Not quite so fast,' he answered. 'I haven't said that you're in on this, have I?' He nodded his self-satisfaction. 'I'm glad they're sensible. They need someone with a brain to advise them. Buller's no fool if he's started in the right direction, but Osmund—I never had any opinion of Osmund's intelligence. Always in the air. Never knows what he's doing. But he'll have to know this time *and* do what he's told.'

I've tried to give you some idea of the way that this conversation went, but if I hadn't heard it with my own ears, I never would have believed it. I perceived that with Pengelly, as with all true criminals, self-pride, conceit, arrogance amounted to insanity. This self-confidence, this conviction that they are not as other men but are made altogether of another clay, is the spring of all their actions, the reason, too, of their inevitable defeat. It is true, perhaps, that they are beings of another mould from the rest of mankind, that the rules and motives of their daily lives, of their ambitions, desires, conquests and defeats belong mentally, spiritually, physically, to another planet, a planet

dark and separate, burning with its own baleful secret fire.

True motiveless wickedness, however, is so rare that Pengelly was a fascinating object to me. So rare and not rare at all. By that I mean that any evil human being who is without conscience or any sense of shame attracts us because it seems to us that we might so easily be like him. Throw over one little scruple, one little moral hesitation, and there we are, and *what* a fine time we might be having. The real characteristic of this post-war world of ours is not that it is especially amoral or bold or advanced, but that the reasons against our acting foolishly, badly or ruinously are so many fewer than they used to be.

As Pengelly continued to talk there were parts of me that rose like awakening animals in response to him. Parts of me were like that, and there were more parts of me that could be like that were they given any encouragement. It was not the remoteness of Pengelly's evil mind and life that, in retrospect, horrified one, but rather its closeness and intimacy. It is absurd to pretend that evil is not infective; it is as infective as measles or scarlet fever, and often as fascinating as a full meal to a hungry man.

Pengelly would never have been as confidential in this little talk of ours had he not despised me so thoroughly, but I was a poor, weak fool of a failure, and there is nothing that a man like Pengelly values so highly as an audience that is so far below him that it can admire without danger of retaliation.

So he let himself go. He told me a little of what he had been doing during these last years. His favourite game was blackmail, his favourite game and, I gathered, his principal source of income. He assured me that I had no idea how simple and easy it was—even, he implied, for a poor, silly, soft fool like myself. Everyone had his or her secret, and all you had to do was to discover it and then play with the victim as you would with a trout.

As he spoke, the world began to take colour from his stories, and soon I saw it in groups of cowering, quivering men and women, bending their backs, falling on to their knees, raising their hands for pity while Pengelly stole in and out among them, his bony head a little thrust forward, his hands crossed behind his back.

Men had hanged themselves to escape him, women suffered the last ignominy, even children had been betrayed. But the astonishing thing was that it became clear, as he proceeded, that he regarded himself as an entirely virtuous being.

It was the whole race of men that was at fault. The fools that men were who, for some lust of the body or mean desire of gain or cheap revenge, put themselves so naïvely, so simply into his hands.

He saw himself as a kind of immortal judge walking about among men and punishing justly follies.

Of his own cleverness also he never could have enough. He had, I am sure, learnt a good deal about the different weaknesses of mankind. Even during this short time that we were together I

learnt some surprising things, and I have no doubt that he was speaking truthfully enough.

But very soon his voice and personality pervaded all the room; it crawled like a snake here and there, its little sharp, bright eyes peering into every corner as it dragged its sluggish, gleaming coils from corner to corner. It seemed to me that the Circus below us was soon aware of its presence, and that all those little manikin figures hastened into the shadows that they might escape it; the white shining surface of the Circus was bare and naked: Everywhere there was a breathless silence, and from the roofs that bordered it the sharp eyes looked down, piercing every shadow....

Meanwhile time was passing, and I was beginning to wonder why they had not returned.

Pengelly also began to wonder.

'Look here,' he said, taking out his watch and suddenly looking up at me with renewed suspicion. 'You're not having a game, are you?'

'Game?' I asked. 'What kind of a game?'

'Well, it's time Osmund was turning up. I haven't all the evening to waste, you know.'

'Oh, he'll turn up,' I said. 'You were early. And I'm very glad you were. See here, Pengelly. Can't you let me in on this plan of yours?'

'What use would you be?' he asked contemptuously. 'You're too soft.'

'Oh, I don't know,' I answered. 'I'm not so soft as I used to be, you know. I've had a pretty rough time these last years, and that changes a man.'

'We'll see,' he replied. 'Of course, you talk

and behave like a gentleman. That's in your favour. There's nobody like a gentleman for taking people in.'

'Is that so?' I answered innocently. 'Why's that?'

'Well, with women, for instance,' Pengelly answered with immense satisfaction. 'Women always trust a gentleman more. Can't think why they should, but there it is. I should think women might like you if you smartened yourself up a bit.'

'Yes,' I said ruefully, 'I want a hair-cut, and, to be frank with you, I haven't had a decent meal for days.'

His suspicions were now entirely quieted. I could see that I was just the kind of help that he needed, a fool, a gentleman, down and out, ready to fill my belly at anybody's cost, very quickly succumbing to all his wishes and demands.

That was a knowledge that I don't doubt he had to the full—how to subdue weaklings to his slightest word with a swift and subtle course of training. No wonder that he should think poorly of the human race when he had seen so many of them so quickly surrender!

In fact, he had a kind of power, even for a moment, over myself, although I sat there loathing him, deriding him, thinking myself vastly his superior. It is strange when you consider how, just then, each of us thought himself infinitely the king of the other!

There followed the oddest ten minutes—I was going to say 'of my life,' but there were to be

other strange ten minutes before this odd evening was over. He got up and began to creep about the room. 'Creep' is a true word; he moved so softly, with his head forward, his hands clasped like twisting tentacles behind his back. His walk was, I think, a kind of triumphant march; I don't doubt but that he had determined on this move into the enemy's camp after a great deal of doubt and hesitation. I shouldn't wonder if he had been spying round the place all day. I myself, you will remember, had caught him on the stairs earlier in the evening. He had come here with many fears and misgivings, and it must have been a pretty important scheme that led him to such dangerous methods.

He argued, I suppose, that Osmund and Buller would be in fierce need of some help, and he hoped, perhaps, to add some gentle blackmail to his scheme. Gentlemen, rash gentlemen, like Osmund, who have served their time in gaol, are often open to blackmail. Life isn't easy for a gentleman who has done time.

But against all this were the tempers and possible violence of his old friends. He couldn't be sure that they wouldn't be very disagreeable before he had time to explain to them how good his scheme for them was. Once they gave him time, the rest was easy, and I expect that he had some very pretty pictures before his eyes of the helpless and useless tools that Osmund and Buller would become.

My reassurance, therefore, was extremely welcome to him. This was exactly what he had

hoped he might find—the poor fools, crushed and hungry, all sight lost of any silly vengeance, ready for anything that he might propose—and added to them, quite unexpectedly, myself, an admirable 'extra.'

So he crept about the room, humming to himself in a little whining undertone, an unrecognisable tune. This sound was exactly like the hum or sibilant whisper of some animal hiding expectantly in the jungle undergrowth. Thin, reedy, just not in tune, hissing through the teeth. Softly he inspected everything—the secretaire, the triptych, the Spanish carving, the chairs. They seemed to rouse in him only the deepest contempt.

Then he came to the window, and, pausing there, pressed his nose against the glass and stared out. Although other more striking things were to happen in connection with him later in the evening, that is the pose in which I shall always remember him. His thin, shabbily clad body (his clothes had an especial shiny shabbiness. They had been always, ever since I first knew him, in exactly that same condition) perched on its toes and his head pressed forward right into the glass while he looked down, finding in the Circus, I don't doubt, numbers of prospective victims.

And once again I had, from my chair, the vision of the white surface covered with little figures scurrying into the safe shadows, then the white virginal expanse empty of all life.

The candles in their old silver holders blew a

little in some mysterious breeze. He turned round and looked at me—looked at me, I felt, with both triumph and contempt.

'So you'd like to come in with me, would you?' he asked. 'Ever had any experience?'

'Experience of what?' I asked.

'Why, of playing on people's feelings . . . having a game with them.'

'You mean blackmail?' I asked.

'Well, no. . . .' His tongue flickered out for a moment between his teeth. 'That's putting it too strong. I don't like the word, and the less it's used the better for everybody.'

He left the window and came close to me, his eyes appraising every part of me. 'Remember Robin Hood?'

'Remember him?' I asked. 'I never met him, if that's what you mean.'

But facetiousness did not please him. I recollect very clearly the savage, mean look he then gave me. It was a look that, I am sure, many of his friends in trouble had grown accustomed to.

'No need to be funny,' he said. 'No time for it if you're coming in with me. . . . Well, what did Robin Hood do? He went about taking money from the rich and giving it to the poor, righting wrongs, so to speak. He and his band were proper for his time, I and mine are proper for this. Same methods exactly.'

'I see,' I answered. 'And *do* you give your profits to the poor?'

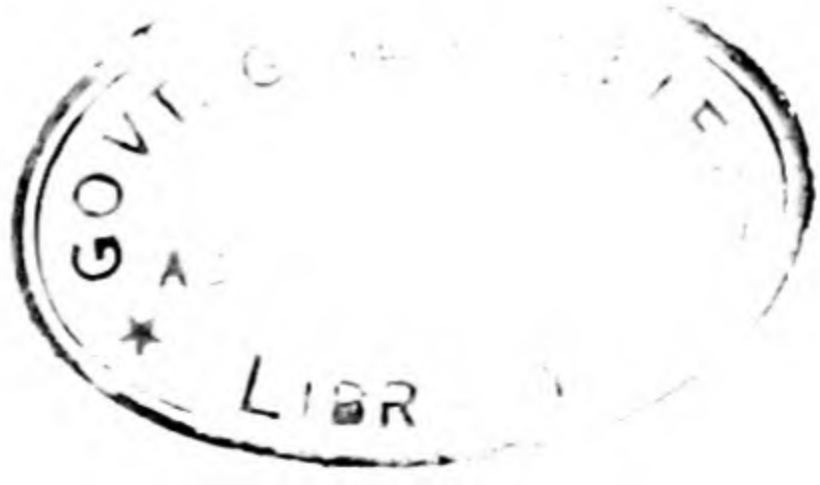
He shot at me again a look of swift suspicion.

'Never you mind what I give to the poor,'

he said. 'You'll see soon enough.' He began then, standing in front of me, as strange a glory-song as ever man uttered—a Song of Triumph proclaimed by a king among men, of his cleverness and brilliance and knowledge, of his victims and their follies and pitiful cries for mercy and silly foolish humiliations, of his remorselessness and relentless pursuit, of his power and subtlety and superiority to all other conquerors . . . and I saw, as he triumphed in front of me, that he really did consider himself a glory and a wonder, that he did not know what remorse or repentance might be, that nothing could touch any softness in him, for there was no softness, nor rouse any shame, for there was no shame . . . and I felt that possibly in this at least he was right—that he was, in the completeness of his purpose, in the absence of all decency, sensitiveness, moral perception, unique in the world, and so, in his own order, and citizen from his own dark planet, a king among men.

He touched my arm with his finger. 'You shall be in on this,' he said. 'You should be useful. But mind—once you're in you're never out again. I'll never let you go once I've my touch on you. You'll be mine. . . .'

But how I was to be his I was never to know, for at that moment we both heard the click of the outside door and from the sound of voices I knew that Buller and Hench had returned.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CHAPTER VI

PENGELLY IN HEAVEN

THE other day, after I had begun this narrative, I found this paragraph in a memoir of William Morris: '*I have found that my memory is, on many occasions, subject to what seems to be a sort of "illumination" or "inspiration." Thus when I have fixed my mind on one, say, of the incidents in these chapters, the scene has begun to unfold itself, perhaps slowly at first but afterwards rapidly and clearly. Meditating upon it for a time, I have lifted my pen and begun to write, then to my surprise the conversations, long buried or hidden somewhere in my memory, have come back to me sometimes with the greatest fullness, word for word, as we say. Nay, not only the words, but the tones, the pauses and the gestures of the speaker.*'

This is so apt to my present business that I cannot avoid quoting it; it is true of the whole of my experience in this narrative but especially true of the scene, so decisive in the lives of some of us, that now occurred.

Buller and Hench came in and stood in the doorway looking at Pengelly. You can understand that he was a vision of some dramatic

importance to them. They had not set eyes on him since the trial. How many harsh and bitter experiences had come to them in the intervening years! Buller was not a man of imagination. He took things very much as they came to him. He was no sentimentalist, no enthusiast either—but when an idea nested in his hair there it remained, and the idea that he had about Pengelly was that 'he owed him one.'

But with Hench it was different. He saw Pengelly as the devil himself, tail and all. He had, I am inclined to think from what afterwards occurred, a sense that he had almost supernatural powers of evil and malevolence—gave Pengelly, in fact, a good deal more than his due.

They stood at the doorway looking at him, and Pengelly looked at them back again. He had received from me too certain a reassurance of his security with them to feel any alarm. Instead of alarm, indeed, he was filled with a triumphant and overwhelming patronage.

He nodded to them.

'Hullo, Buller. Glad to see you. Hullo, Hench, how are you?' Then he felt in his pocket and produced a very flamboyant gold cigarette-case from which he extracted a cigarette. Then he handed it to Buller.

'Have one?' he said. Buller was mechanically about to accept, then something seemed to occur to him. He shook his head.

'No, thanks. I'm not smoking.' We all sat down. Buller sat near the door as though he were guarding it. Pengelly took charge of the pro-

ceedings; indeed, so entirely was he at home that he went to the windows and drew the curtains across.

'Cosier,' he said, 'much cosier.' Then he sat down in the Spanish arm-chair, crossing his spindly legs. 'How have you been?' he asked Buller.

'All right. . . . How's yourself?'

'All right,' said Buller, sucking his imaginary straw.

'Cold, isn't it?' continued Pengelly affably. 'Shouldn't wonder if we have a heap of snow before the night's out.'

'Shouldn't wonder,' said Buller.

There was a little pause, and I remember how I noticed that Hench, sitting in a chair by the window, was trembling from head to foot.

'Osmund be long?' asked Pengelly.

'Come in any moment,' said Buller. 'Nice little place he's got, hasn't he?'

'It's all right,' said Pengelly. 'You should see a little place I've got Maidenhead way. Pretty as a picture. Five minutes from the river. Garden and everything.'

'I'd like to,' said Buller.

'What's his idea,' asked Pengelly, 'only having candles? Bit old-fashioned, isn't it?'

'Don't know,' said Buller. 'Prefer electric light myself.'

Then we all heard the outside door. A moment afterwards Osmund came in.

How I wish that I had the power to solve Osmund's secret! Only Dostoevski perhaps

could do that; he was, beyond question, one of Dostoevski's 'sick men.' And yet he was not at all a Dostoevski figure, in no way at all Russian or semi-Asiatic. He was English—English in his bodily strength, frankness, honesty, lack of subtlety. But, like so many Englishmen, he was always at war with his imagination, feeling that it was something dangerous, and that he would be better without it. But he could not be without it. The catastrophe that ended in his imprisonment increased it, and the war (as again with so many Englishmen) gave him a *malaise* of revolt and disgust and a passionate desire to do something that 'would change everything.' This revolt made him a spiritual exile from his own country. There are no spiritual exiles so unfortunate as the English because there is no other country possible for them with whatever pugnacity they may determine to acquire one.

He had really come to feel, I believe, in these post-war years that England was 'lost,' that she was going down and down into an abyss, and this because rogues were everywhere in charge of her and the land was filled with devils. There were very many men in the country at this time who felt as he did. But his sense of it was the more dangerous because there was a fire in his blood, a ferocity and impatience over which he never got control.

He was filled with nobility, warm affection, a childish belief in the possibility of right, but I think his sense that he had 'ruined' himself spiritually over that silly and so disastrous episode of the burglary fiasco, that both he and his country

were doomed, this worked in his brain like a fever. His loathing of Pengelly had its root, I don't doubt, in his loathing of himself.

At any rate I saw quite clearly when he came into that room, where we were waiting for him, that he was pitched at that moment to a point of disgust at the evil both in himself and the world around him that was not far from madness.

I would put it this way. If, at that instant, out of the snowy Circus, there had risen before his window a hero who had called to him to follow him to some glorious crusade, Osmund would have been in that second translated into a triumphantly happy man for whom Pengelly was too low a worm to be considered.

He needed only some campaign, some knight-errantry towards the ennobling of the world, with a chance in it for himself to win some glorious redemption, and all would have been magnificently well with him. But alas, all that there was, was the rosy volume of *Quixote*, lying by itself on the bare refectory table.

He was quiet enough when he came in. I could never see him, as I think I have already said, without feeling him to be of different clay from the rest of us. It was not only his height and the noble carriage of his head, but something spiritual that set him apart from us. His disgust at his own failures, perhaps, or his vision of horizons wider and grander than any that we could see. When he saw Pengelly he nodded to him.

'Sorry I'm late,' he said. He sat down on the sofa near to me. I fancy that Pengelly's assurance

was a little dimmed by Osmund's presence, but if it was, he had no consciousness of the possibility of any danger to himself.

He continued to take command of the situation.

'Well,' he said. 'Here we all are.' Then, smirking a little, 'What about a drink? Not very hospitable, are you, Osmund? And why not a cigar while you're about it?'

Osmund nodded to Buller, who got up and went out. We all sat quite silently while he was away. He returned with whisky, soda-water, some glasses, a box of cigars. He put them down on the table. I stretched my hand out.

'I'll take that book,' I said. 'It will be out of the way.' He handed me the *Quixote*. His legs a little spread, his face very serious, he poured out some whisky.

'Say when,' he said to Pengelly.

'Right you are,' said Pengelly. 'Not too much soda.' The glass was passed to him and the box of cigars. Each of us in turn was offered then a drink and each of us refused. Pengelly looked at us, and that was, I think, the first moment when it occurred to him that we were not, perhaps, quite so friendly as we ought to be.

'Hullo!' he said. 'Nobody drinking?'

The others said nothing. I muttered: 'Have one later.'

Osmund turned to Pengelly.

'Mr. Pengelly,' he said, 'you wrote to Charlie Buller saying that you would like to meet him and myself and Hench again and that you had

something to propose. Here we are—at your service.'

I knew then one of the many reasons why Pengelly detested Osmund. Osmund was absolutely polite, but he conveyed, in spite of himself, the sense that he was of altogether another order. It was not conceit, nor pride, nor arrogance, it was something that was so true that no good manners could keep it back.

I could see how, at the sound of his voice, Pengelly's hatred of him, already strong enough, was strengthened a hundredfold.

'All right, Osmund,' said Pengelly, lighting his cigar, as though he were king of the world. 'All in good time. Not too fast now. I have got something to suggest—something that might be useful to you, but there's no hurry. Here we are, all friends together, and I must say,' he added, finishing his whisky at a gulp and stretching his glass out, with great familiarity, to Buller for more, 'that I'm glad there's no malice felt on either side. Tell you the truth, I thought there might have been. I was sorry I had to do as I did, but you were in for it anyhow. You went about it like infants in arms—you did really——'

He leaned back puffing at his cigar, while his little legs, crossed knee over knee, jerked convulsively in the air.

'If you don't mind,' said Osmund quietly, 'we've all been very curious to know—why exactly you did let us in. You owed us no grudge —or did you?'

'Well, now,' said Pengelly, evidently enjoying

himself, 'as to grudge—that's scarcely the word. You see, Osmund, you're a bit above yourself at times—you don't mean it, I dare say, but I'm sensitive, always was from a kid. What my father used to say ever since I was a little nipper was, "Do as you would be done by." He always said that was a safe motto, and there's a lot in it. Let anyone treat me as man to man, and it's my hand in theirs every time, but sort of looking down your nose—well, that never did anyone any good, if you get me. Of course I don't suppose you *knew* you were so stuck-up as you were, but there it was. I've got a skin less than most men—my mother always said so—and I feel things. Things can hurt me surprisingly, and I don't mind telling you, Osmund, now that the past *is* past, that you hurt me quite a lot the way you cut me short and didn't consider I was a human being with feelings just like anyone else. Of course it's silly to be sensitive, I know, but there it is—it's the way one's made. . . . One can't help oneself. . . .'

I remembered that we listened to this long rigmarole which might have continued quite indefinitely had he not buried his face in his glass, in complete silence.

Then Osmund said:

'Yes, I see. . . . But why Buller and Hench? They hadn't done you any harm?'

Here Pengelly sat forward and looked at both his old friends with a very considering glance.

'Well, now, I'll tell you,' he said at last. 'It's a funny thing—funny, I mean, the way little actions lead to big results. But Charlie Buller there—

I dare say he's quite forgot something, something that altered the whole of his existence, as you may say——'

'What's that?' said Buller, leaning forward and staring at Pengelly.

'Throw your mind back a bit, Charlie, it'll interest you.' I could see that Pengelly was now most thoroughly enjoying himself, his eyes almost closed, one leg kicking on the other, his long spidery fingers tip-meeting-tip as though in prayer. 'Don't you remember a girl at the pub down there, a girl with red hair, called Amy?'

'I do,' said Buller.

'And do you remember that she was quite sweet on me until you told her lies about me?'

'I don't remember telling her anything about you.'

'No, you wouldn't. But you did all the same. I don't know just what you told her, but she was shy of me after that—a fine girl, she was, with a fine figure.'

'It's a long time ago,' murmured Buller.

'It is,' cried Pengelly triumphantly. 'So you may think, but I don't forget quite so easily. It isn't my nature to. I haven't got along in this world by forgetting everything, I can tell you. No, sir. You were real nasty, Charlie Buller, about that girl. It wasn't as though you wanted her yourself either. I don't know what you were so mean for. Anyway she cost you two years in gaol, that girl did. It's a pity you've forgotten—important, she was, as it turned out.'

Buller said nothing. We none of us said anything.

'And Hench?' at last Osmund asked quietly.

'Hench?' Pengelly asked contemptuously. 'Oh, I'd nothing against *him*. He was in it, so he went with the rest.'

A cry, a strange, bitter, agonising cry, so foreign to us that it was as though someone besides ourselves were in the room, broke on to us.

'And it was for nothing—for no reason—that you . . . that you . . . my wife. . . .'

Even Pengelly seemed to feel something then.

'Well,' he said at last, 'you were trying to crack a crib, weren't you? You deserved what you got, didn't you? It would have been the same even though I hadn't let them in on you.'

'And those were *all* your reasons?' Osmund asked at last.

'Oh, not at all,' Pengelly answered, finishing his second glass. 'I had to be in with the police just then. Had a little affair of my own on hand. All the weeks I was covering you I was playing my own game as well. . . .' He puffed at his cigar confidently. 'What I was hoping you'd see, and what I'm glad to find you *have* seen, is that I hadn't anything to do with it, so to speak. It would have been the same thing whether I'd been there *or* no. *And* you've had your lesson and taken it well. Now we're all good friends again, and I'm glad of it.'

I remember noticing at this point that he was a little uneasy about Hench. That moment's

outcry had disturbed him a trifle. He threw him furtive, half-questioning glances.

Osmund was sitting up straight on the sofa now, his legs drawn in, his great back set. I wondered how Pengelly could be as completely unconscious of the sinister force behind that quiet voice as he was.

At last he said: 'So much for the past. Now what of the present? You suggested that we could be of use to one another. What's your plan?'

'I'm not sure,' Pengelly answered, looking at each one of us in turn, 'that there are not too many in on this. I've had a little talk with our friend here,' nodding at me, 'and he seems to want to share in the fun—but about Mr. Hench now. . . .'

He paused, suddenly shooting his bony forehead forward in Hench's direction.

'Fun?' said Osmund. 'We've got to know what kind of fun it is before we come in with you. That's quite fair, isn't it?'

'Have you?' said Pengelly, smiling in what he must have considered a very sly manner. 'That's just the question.'

Osmund, Buller and Hench all made a movement together as though they were closing in. Then Buller said:

'How do you mean—the question? You asked us to meet you here, didn't you?'

'That's right,' said Pengelly. 'But I'd like to know a bit more about all of you first. You see, it's quite a time since we met. I know you're all pretty well on your uppers. I've found that out at any rate.'

No one said anything.

Pengelly began to be a little irritated.

'Well, now, aren't you? There's Osmund here—him and his wife. This is a fine fresh flat, I'll allow, but how much longer is he going to be able to stay here? What about that last job you had, Osmund—Secretary to Edward Hoskins, Esq., wasn't it? Someone suddenly peached on you, didn't he, told Mr. Hoskins a few things? And you, Charlie Buller—things haven't been quite so dandy with you lately, have they?'

Osmund spoke.

'We don't want this to last for ever. If you have a plan to put in front of us let's have it—otherwise——'

'Yes—otherwise?' said Pengelly.

'Otherwise—we are only wasting time.'

'Not at all,' said Pengelly. 'You've got it *all* wrong. What I want you fellows to realise is that I can do what I like with you—so to speak. I can stop your settling in any place where you're comfortable—if I want to. Not that I bear you any sort of malice. I'm not one to bear malice. Not at all. But I wouldn't have you think, the four of you, that you do *me* a favour if you come in to my little scheme. Quite the *contrary*. *I'm* doing the favour, you understand.'

Osmund jumped up. For an instant I was in doubt as to what he would do. His movement was so sudden, his stature so great when he got to his feet, that Pengelly shrank back into his chair and raised his hand, then covered his awkwardness with a nervous laugh. Osmund had gone to the

window. With a sharp tearing sound he jerked back the curtains. We could see now beyond the windows the shadowed glow of the lighted sky, and faintly, as though jerked there by a drunken hand, the reflection from a leaping sky-sign marked the wall above the fireplace.

Osmund turned from looking out, and stood with his back to the window, facing the room.

'All right,' he said quietly. 'You are doing us a favour. We realise your generosity. We are broken and ruined—at your feet, Pengelly. What will you do with us?'

Pengelly's eyes sparkled.

'Now you're kidding me. You don't truly feel like that. All the same I take it that you're pretty desperate, all of you, and ready to come in on any sensible scheme—that is, if it's really sensible.'

'Yes, if it's really sensible,' repeated Osmund.

'This is sensible, all right,' said Pengelly, triumphantly. He sunk his voice and leaned forward in confidence towards us. 'The fact is that there are a lot of folk in this world who've funny habits or are fond of someone they shouldn't be, or have been in a mess sometime and want to forget it. You can recognise that yourselves, having had the experience you have. . . .'

(As he spoke I could see the glittering expanse of the Circus, and, staring from the caves on every side of it, hundreds of eyes, furry with anxious fear.)

'Well, what I say is that if a man's made a slip he oughtn't to grumble if he has to pay for it. Why, you wouldn't believe the dirty things men

do and the nasty ways they have. Why should they get off scot-free and the rest of us suffer? Here are you three, for instance—made one little mistake and had two years in gaol for it. Don't you feel a bit sore at all these folk dancing around, wine, women, and song and all the rest of it, and never a penny the worse for it? That's where I come in,' he added.

'That's where you come in,' Osmund repeated.

'Yes, and where you'll come in too, if you join us, Osmund. You see' (he became with every word more confidential, more sure of himself and of us), 'what I'm in need of is gentlemen. Real pukker gentlemen that look right and talk right and eat their food right and make love to women right. Now you're a gentleman, Osmund, and so's Gunn. I can't tell you what an advantage a gentleman is at this game, especially with women. I'd give you quite a decent share of the profits, as long as you played straight with me—and there *are* some profits, I can tell you.'

Buller sucked straws; Hench half rose as though he would speak, then sat down again.

Osmund nodded his head.

'I understand,' he said. 'What's commonly known as blackmail.'

Pengelly shrugged his bony shoulders.

'That's a silly word to my thinking. After all, what isn't blackmail when you come to think of it? Who is there isn't for ever bribing his friend to keep quiet about him, if you understand what I mean? Everybody's got a secret somewhere, and if his friends didn't look after him where'd he be?

I tell you, Osmund, this is the grandest game in the universe. There isn't anything else to touch it for fun and excitement. You never know *what* you're up against, and you should see the way folks squeal. Why, I've got a woman now——' He stopped. 'No, that's telling. But you four come in with me and you'll have the time of your lives. I'll do the directing. I've got quite a bunch under me as it is, and I make it worth their while too. . . . What do you say?'

Buller stretched his legs and arms and yawned. 'It sounds a good enough scheme,' he said—'for the right kind of man.'

'Of course,' said Pengelly, looking round on us rather as a trainer looks round on his animals, 'you'd have to do what you're told, you know.'

It was then that, looking round and catching sight of Osmund's face, I suddenly became myself frightened. An immense disgust, contempt and, oddly mixed with it, a sort of pity rose in me toward Pengelly.

I believed him. I know now that there had been no original plan in their minds about him. They had pictured him, perhaps, as at last at their mercy, and so, in very utter contempt of him, they would have told him so. But what they had never pictured was this arrogance and patronage, this confident proposal to them of the vilest schemes open to mankind. It was, I think, his certain belief that we would agree to his foul purposes that drove us to the climax. For we were driven; driven if you like by other things than Pengelly, driven by the ivory pictures of the secretaire, the silver

candlesticks, by the gleaming light beyond the window-panes.

But it happened that I looked up and caught the moment when Osmund passed from calm to tempest. His rages had always been like that, descending on him as swiftly as a squall falling from the hills across a lake. He was the only human being I have ever known who seemed to be inhabited by a devil at such times—not an evil devil, nothing mean or vile, but a spirit of tempest, ready to be gone as swiftly as he came.

I wondered that Pengelly felt nothing of the change. For a moment he did not. He went on as confidently as before.

'It's a paying game—there's no doubt about that. It's marvellous how they pay up when you've got them by the throat. It's very seldom they cut up rough, and if they do there's lots of ways of dealing with them.

'Of course you'd want a bit of training, but I expect it would come natural enough after a time. Some take to it like second nature. I wouldn't wonder if you did, Gunn! I bet you'd be one of the smartest——'

He broke off. He was aware of our silence. He recognised that it was different from our earlier attitude. Our eyes were on him too. He was suddenly suspicious that perhaps he had gone too far. Those whiskies had unsealed his tongue too readily. He drew back into his chair, and I noticed that that convention of melodrama was in this instance true; he *was* gathered together like an animal ready to spring.

Then Osmund's voice, deep, shaking with emotion, broke our silence.

'You filthy little swine!' I heard Hench draw a deep sigh. But Pengelly was quick. He knew instantly that our whole attitude had been bluff, that he was in the presence of his enemies, and that he had been a fool to give himself away.

Lord! How he hated us then! He half rose, resting his thin hands on the arms of the chair.

'So that's your game, is it?' he said. 'You've tried to trick me, have you? Well, you've bitten off more than you can chew, the lot of you. I wasn't such a fool as to come here unprotected, and don't you think it. If anything happens to me you're in for it—the lot of you. I should have thought you'd had enough of gaol——'

'It's possible,' said Osmund, 'that we don't care what the consequences are.' Then he came forward a little and stood staring at Pengelly as though he were delivering judgement on him.

'Understand us, Pengelly, this isn't any business of revenge. You were right in that. We let ourselves into a dirty business, and were punished for it—justly punished, I dare say. Our point is quite different. You're a nuisance to society, vile, foul. . . . There's no goodness in you anywhere. You are the cause of misery and wretchedness to everyone you touch. You've proved it again and again by your own words. There's nothing to be said for you—absolutely nothing at all. That's our case. We've heard you and we've condemned you.'

Pengelly's eyes went straight for the door. He knew his danger by now.

'Oh, shut your mouth——!' he screamed and leapt from his chair across the floor. Then things happened quickly. Buller was in front of the door, but before Pengelly got to him Osmund was on to him. I saw Osmund rise to his height and spread his shoulders. He had his hands about Pengelly's throat. Pengelly kicked. A chair fell. Then Osmund had him hanging in air, his thin spidery legs, his long bony arms struggling. Osmund's huge hands pressed. There came from Pengelly throttled, broken, little screams like a rabbit's. Once he seemed to have his head free, and he let out a yell of terror, sheer naked animal terror.

Then Osmund swung him like a dummy, and brought him down with a thud on the table. There was a little moan, a convulsive kick of the legs.

Buller murmured: 'My God, you've killed him.'

From his chair Hench began to whimper like a child.

CHAPTER VII

EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF A CORPSE

From an infinite distance came the sound of Hench's whimpering. It went on and on, something between a sniffle and a strangled breath. Otherwise the silence in the room was profound, and it seemed endless.

The body was crumpled in a heap on the floor; a leg crooked back had its trouser hitched up, and pale mottled skin showed above a shabby sock. The head hung forward on to the breast.

At last Osmund bent down, picked up the body and laid it down on the sofa, the face away from us, but, as he moved it, I caught a glimpse of the pale untidy face, the tongue protruding, and it was in that moment that I had my conviction, which the evening was to strengthen; namely, that Pengelly wasn't there, that he had escaped us at the instant when Osmund banged his head on the table, that he was at this minute jeering at us somewhere in the background. If I seem to show a certain levity or casualness towards this corpse you must remember that I had this conviction. I recollect also that I had a mingled sense of congratulation and pity towards the

corpse, congratulation because it had at last escaped from the odiousness of Pengelly's personality, pity because it was now so helpless.

Osmund bent down and felt beneath the body's waistcoat. Then he straightened himself.

'Yes, he's gone,' he said.

Charlie Buller, who seemed in no kind of way discomposed, nodded his head.

'And a damned good thing too, filthy swine! . . . And what are we going to do with it?'

Osmund stood there, his legs spread, looking out through the window. He talked softly as though to himself.

'I didn't mean to. It was my temper again. His taking it for granted that we were like himself. That's the mistake he always made. Our mistake too—we were partly responsible. . . . My damnable temper.'

Buller broke in. 'All right. Never mind whose fault it was. We're all in it now, and what we've got to decide is what we're going to do with it. We can't leave it here all night.' Nobody said anything. He went on: 'Somebody may come after him. It isn't likely he'd trust himself into our hands without warning one of his pals. We may have got rid of *him*, but we aren't rid of his gang.'

Then Hench broke in. He jumped up from his chair and began to wave his hands in an absurd manner. 'You aren't rid of him! You aren't rid of him!' he cried out in his shrill, piping voice. 'You don't get rid of him by killing him. You've done the one thing that'll never rid us of him.

Don't you see? Oh, my God, don't you see? . . . What I mean to say is he isn't dead at all and never will be now. Never, never!'

He was going to scream or shout or do something equally silly, so I stepped in then, went over to him, caught his fat shoulders, forced him down into his chair.

'Look here, Hench—if you don't behave decently we'll have to knock you on the head just to keep you quiet. We're not going to have the whole of the Circus in here.' Then I told Buller to give him a stiff whisky, which he did. Hench drank it, then turned his face from us all, hiding it in his arms, one shudder passing over his body after another.

I remember then that I became as urgent as Charlie Buller that something must be done immediately. I couldn't bear to see the thing lying there, as though it were shamming sleep, with its trouser still hitched up and the bare flesh showing. The whole room seemed stained and beastly so long as that crumpled thing lay there, and I felt, as I suppose many a murderer has felt, that if only the body were removed out of sight, all would be well.

Osmund's immobility irritated me. He just stood there, looking out of the window, lost apparently in his own thoughts. I shook him by the arm.

'See here, Osmund, Buller's right. We've got to do something about this. Either you can telephone to the police and tell them all about it, or we must put this away somewhere—and quickly.'

Buller broke in.

'Telephone the police? Hang by the neck for *that* swine? No, thank you. I can deal with it. I've got the car parked round the corner. I'll take it in the car to the river behind Dirk's. They won't find the body for two days after that and when they do they won't recognise it.'

Somehow the thought of the outside world made me shiver. I didn't know who or what Dirk's might be, but I had stepped suddenly into the unreal pantomime of detective novels where police officers and newspaper men and dope fiends jostle one another, puppet-fashion, on a mathematical staircase constructed of algebraical formulae.

'How are you going to get it to the car this time of day with everybody about?' I asked.

'Someone will have to help me. The stairs are dark. We'll take him down between us as though he were tight. Once it's in the car I can manage alone.'

Osmund nodded his head.

'Yes, if you like. It won't make any difference in the end. Not for me, anyway. I'm caught all right.' Then added to himself in a sort of whisper, 'Yes, he's caught me.'

Then he threw up his head and was quite suddenly practical. 'But I'm not going to have any of you spoiling your lives for my mess. It's my affair. I'll deal with it.'

'No, you won't,' said Buller abruptly. 'Not this bit of it, anyway. With your height and everything you'd attract attention at once. Gunn

and I will manage this. There's no difficulty. Shove his hat over his eyes, put his waterproof on him. There's no risk at all.'

He stopped abruptly and drew his breath in. He had heard a sound. We all had. The opening of the outer door.

The funny thing then was that, at that moment, when we all of us were stiffened by the sound into immobility (even Hench ceased his shudder), the corpse rolled over on to its back, one leg tumbling off the sofa, exactly as though it had heard the opening door. There it lay, eyes staring, tongue hanging out, the head indecently crooked. We waited. There were steps in the outer hall. Osmund looked at me.

'Helen!' he said. 'She is the only one who has a key.'

I went as though he had ordered me. Looking back now, I think that the truth was that I instantly felt that I was the only person in the whole world to come in between her and Pengelly's body. She, at least, must be kept away from this. . . .

So I went straight out of the room into the little hall. Here there was electric light (Osmund's aesthetic prejudices didn't extend apparently to coat-racks and umbrella-stands) and just inside the door Helen was standing, staring in front of her and taking off her gloves. It is all very well to reduce everything to chemical formulae, but you are not going to tell me that the look that Helen and I gave one another at that moment, a look so much more searching, involving

so much more of recognition of the eternal bond between us than any physical attraction, had anything chemical about it.

In that awful moment, when I was sick in the stomach and blind in the eyes from the reaction from all that had just occurred, I saw Helen with more clarity and justice, saw the beauty of her spirit and the generous nobility of her heart more vividly than I had ever done before, even in my most romantic dreams of her (and I had had many). We always afterwards admitted that it was that glance of recognition in the little hall that pledged us to one another.

All that she said was: 'Oh, Dick . . . I'm so glad you're still here. I hoped you would be.'

There was something ironical in her greetings even with those she loved the most, irony, if you understand, turned towards herself, an implication that she always found life, and her place in it, a little absurd.

'What's brought you back? Was the dinner off?' (I can't tell you how unexpected I found the absence of all noise in that other room to be. My ears, all this time, were straining for every sound.)

'Well . . .' She looked at me, smiling. I smiled back. 'My friend's young man turned up—unexpectedly, of course. They wanted me to stay, but I'm much too tactful. They wanted the three of us to go out to a restaurant. I detest restaurants. Then—I hadn't seen you for so long—you're so elusive, you know, Dick. I might never have set eyes on you again. I had

expected that you and John would have gone out to dine somewhere. I thought I'd make myself a cup of tea here and wait—in case he brought you back.'

All the time that she was talking, she was listening. I realised that the silence was forcing itself upon her. She took off her hat, looked at herself in the glass, patted her hair, then moved forward a little. But I didn't stir.

'Well—where *is* John? Why haven't you gone out? It's a quarter past eight.'

'Some friends have come,' I said. 'They've kept him.'

'Friends? . . . Who?'

'Charlie Buller. Mr. Hench.'

She nodded.

'I knew he wanted me out of the way. I'm not such a fool. . . .' She stopped suddenly. We both heard it—Hench crying something out, shrilly, like a child's cry.

'Dick, what's the matter? Something's been going on? What is it?'

'There *has* been a bit of a row,' I acknowledged. 'That was Hench. Ever since his wife died he's been queer. I never saw such a change in a man. But it's nothing. Buller and Osmund have got him in hand all right.'

Her voice softened. 'Poor Hench! I'm sorrier for him than for any of them. Are you mixed up in this?'

'Not a bit; I came quite by chance.'

'Go in and tell John that you're taking me out for an hour. It's such ages since we've met. I

have a thousand things to ask you; John won't mind. He can join us later.'

She smiled. Her eyes were bright with something that I did not dare to connect as yet with myself. She turned once more to the bedroom, then drew back. She put her hand out to steady herself on the door-handle and whispered:

'Pengelly!'

I followed her gaze and saw that she was staring at a hat and a waterproof hanging on the rack. Together they were unmistakable. I myself, after all these years, would have recognised them anywhere. There were, I don't doubt, hundreds of other poor mortals in this city to whom that hat and waterproof were insignia of shame and torture.

I nodded.

'Yes, he's been here. He's gone.'

'He's gone? . . . Why are you hiding something? Something's happened? I don't believe he's gone—the vile . . .'

She was interrupted because the door opened and Osmund came out.

She went straight up to him and, looking him in the face, said:

'What's been going on? Dick's hiding something. Pengelly's been here. What about?'

Osmund nodded his head.

'Yes, he's been here—but he's gone.'

'I don't believe it. He's still here. His hat and coat are there.'

She pushed past him and went into the room.

She stopped just inside the door. One of the candles was flickering and rivalled in its jumping

shadows the reflections of the sky-signs on the wall. Pengelly was lying, straightened out on the sofa, a handkerchief over his face.

'He's dead,' she said.

'Yes,' said Osmund. 'I killed him.'

She swayed ever so little, put her hand for a moment in front of her eyes, and gave her husband the strangest look. It was a look of terror. She turned and glanced at all of us; then she left the room without another word. Osmund followed her, closing the door behind him.

Buller shook his head. 'What a shame!' he said. 'What a damned shame! Couldn't you have stopped her coming? It's worse now. It was bad enough, but now it's worse.'

He looked round at Hench and saw that he was of no use at all. He was sitting staring in front of him, his hands hanging.

Then he appealed to me.

'Look here, Gunn, you're the only one who's any good. It's bad luck on you; you had nothing to do with this. You oughtn't to have been in this at all. We must get it away. Osmund's gone a bit queer, Hench is no good. We've got to get busy.'

At that moment a clock tinkled the quarter-past somewhere.

'Quarter-past eight. Will you help me?'

At his direct appeal I found that I had been thinking only of Helen, seeing her and Osmund outside that door, wanting to be with her, longing. . . .

But at the urgency of his voice I swung right

round. I, as it were, jerked myself, my brain, my consciousness, my determination into another position.

'Yes,' I said, 'I'll help you.'

'There's only one thing to do. We've got to get it into the car. It isn't very pleasant, but we must manage it. Wait—I'll go out and get his hat and coat.'

He opened the door, peered out, then went, closing the door behind him.

I had been standing near the window while he was speaking to me, and the moment he was gone Hench sprang up and laid his trembling hand on me.

'Don't go,' he said. 'Don't go, Gunn. It's nothing to do with you. And we can't get rid of him that way. Don't you see—he's outside, waiting on the staircase. That isn't him there. We must tell everybody. That's the only way to get clear.'

I saw that he was on the edge of the wildest hysteria. I felt an odd tenderness for him; in fact at that moment I felt an extraordinary tenderness and compassion for the whole world, as though all human beings had shared in this deed, as though all human fates had been altered by it.

I put my arm round him.

'Wait a minute, Hench. Take this calmly. Pull yourself up a bit. Remember this. Pengelly was the dirtiest, rottenest fellow there's ever been. There's never been anyone worse. He was a blackmailer, and there's nothing rottener than that—nothing. He's made hundreds of

men and women wretched, frightening them, bullying them. He had no remorse, no mercy. He wanted to make us as bad as himself. And he was responsible for your wife's death.'

He broke in.

'But she wouldn't have wanted to kill him. She didn't wish anyone harm. However bad he was, she wouldn't have hurt him. And we haven't killed him. He's more alive than ever he was. He'll be with us always now. Oh, God, God . . . if only I hadn't come. . . .'

Buller came in, carrying the hat and coat. At the sight of them I was suddenly practical, resolved.

'Sorry I was so long,' Buller whispered (we were all speaking in whispers). 'I went out into the passage to see if anyone was there. It's all clear.'

'Is Osmund there?' I asked.

'No. They've gone into the bedroom. You see, I want us to get away before he's back. Osmund is so damned funny. You never know what he'll do—impulsive. . . . Here—catch his arm while I slip the coat on.'

I put my arm round the body's waist, and it leaned its lolling head against my chest as though it loved me. I raised the hand, and it was warm to my touch. We slipped the waterproof on and pushed the hat down on to the head.

As we raised the body away from the sofa I had a brief attack of nausea. Everything in the room began to swim round me, the silver candlesticks were trebled and the windows gaped like

pools of water. It passed. I was quite steady. Buller held the body firmly round the waist. I clutched one arm. It made quite a passable figure between us, very like a drunken man, the head sunk, the feet dragging, the shoes tapping on the floor.

There was no sign of Osmund and Helen—no sign or sound of anyone or anything. Then, as I opened the flat-door with my spare hand, I saw that someone had at that same moment switched on the staircase light from below. It was too late to turn back. Even as we came out, the door closing behind us, I saw a large, stout, red-faced woman mounting the stairs towards us.

She paused on the top step, panting for breath. She was one of those strange women, not, I suppose, peculiar to our times, who, well over forty in age, nevertheless dress like girls of twenty. She had a little black shining hat pulled tightly over her shingled hair, but she was wearing evening dress, her shoulders covered with a very gaily coloured Spanish shawl; her skirts were extremely short and her legs in black silk stockings immense.

Buller and I had both instinctively moved forward a little to cover our burden. She was at first occupied with the recovery of her breath, and saw nothing at all. Then realising us, she gasped:

'Major Escott?'

(So vividly did this awful moment drive that name into me that, when only a few weeks ago I encountered the name in a newspaper, I could not for a minute or two read the paragraph that followed.)

'I beg your pardon?' asked Buller.

'Oh no—it's all right.' (Her hand was against her panting breast.) 'I saw you come out of that door. I thought it might be Major Escott's. He's in this building somewhere.'

'Higher up, madam,' said Buller.

'Oh, thank you.' She moved on to the foot of the next staircase. Then she turned. Her silly, round, rather sheepish eyes were like saucers. She had one of the stupidest faces possible to woman and a very coquettish manner.

'You're *sure* it's higher up?' she said. 'Because I *thought* it was number three. . . .' Then she saw the lolling figure between us. She gave a little gasp.

'Oh! . . . is your friend ill?'

Buller smiled grimly. 'We have been celebrating. . . .'

'Oh yes. . . .' She hesitated. 'Because I have my car. The chauffeur could fetch a doctor. . . .'

'You are very kind,' Buller answered. 'It is nothing—a little fresh air. . . .'

She looked again. I had an agonising sense that she suspected something; my own knees went, and the body hanging on my arm weighed suddenly a ton.

'Oh, if that's all——' She gave us another look and went up, disappearing round the corner. We waited until her steps died away. I leant back against the door of Osmund's flat.

'I'm sorry, Buller—I'm going to be sick.' Indeed the floor and the stairs were heaving and

dancing; the thin glass globe of the electric light swelled and retracted.

Buller was disgusted. He jerked at the body. 'Here, give me the thing. I thought you were up to this. Go back and be sick in the flat. I'll manage it alone.'

I was ashamed. I shook my head.

'No, I'm all right.'

'Remember he was a beast,' Buller went on rapidly. 'The rankest ever. If anyone deserved a knock on the head. . . .'

The words with which I had tried to strengthen Hench ; and at the thought of Hench and his hysteria, I pulled myself together.

'Come on,' I said, and we moved forward.

As we moved down that flight of stairs I became convinced that Pengelly was still alive. After all, it might be so. No one had made any very careful examination.

It seemed to me that he was grinning under his hat, but it was especially the rolling of the head that had a horrible life in it. I felt that at all cost I must stop and steady that head with my hand. My own fingers slipped and came into contact with those fingers that were still warm.

'Buller, wait. . . .' We were half-way down that section of the staircase. 'I don't think he's dead . . . the way his head rolls. . . .'

'He's dead,' said Charlie,—'Stone,' and went on. It seemed to me that those fingers were trying to catch mine, and that roused in me a nasty vindictiveness. My hand tightened on the arm, and it was as though I said: 'If you are

grinning, 'there's nothing to grin about. If you play any tricks I'll finish you off properly.' The heels of the shoes tap-tapped at every step.

On the next landing there was nobody. We moved forward. There was only one more flight of stairs, and we were on the ground floor. We passed the barber's door, now dark and dead! What months ago that visit to that barber seemed! There was a very dim light here and no sound at all. We might have been stepping down into a well without bottom.

Half-way down this last flight Buller paused. 'Now it's going to be a bit difficult,' he whispered. 'This is the only risky bit, but there's nothing else for it. The car's parked round the corner. I've got to fetch it and you've got to wait here. It's all right. We'll stick it down in this corner—you stand over it. I'll only be a minute or two, but when I've got the car we can't leave it outside more than a moment. It's almost certain no one will come, and if they do they won't notice anything.'

I had a wild impulse of refusal. To wait alone in this dark corner, alone with Pengelly. . . . But there was something about Buller, a courage, an indifference to all emotionalism, that shamed me. He added: 'After all, there were lots of worse things in the war. . . .'

He took the body in his arms, propped it up on the last step in the corner against the wall, nodded to me, and was gone. I stood there, the nausea still with me.

Impossible now not to believe that Pengelly

was alive! He sat there, his head forward, huddled, his legs jutting out. I had to push his legs back, and, as I did so, one of his hands, colder surely than a moment ago, touched mine. When did *rigor mortis* set in? The time of it differed, didn't it? In any case not yet for a while. But why think of that when he was alive? At any moment he might lean forward and clutch me round the knees. My own knees were trembling. It wouldn't be very difficult to pull me down and then, with those cold hands, to strangle me. . . . Every kind of wild idea flew to my brain, and every sound in the world began to be audible to me. . . . The whole building stirred with a life of its own, a life altogether independent of the human beings who inhabited it. A small inquisitive wind came creeping down the stairs wondering what I had got there. In the corner beside me were a broom and a bucket, and they seemed also to share the same inquisitiveness. But there were more positive sounds than these. A vibration like a silly malicious giggle seemed to tremble through the building. This was almost out of earshot, but not quite. If I listened with all my attention, I caught the quiver of it just as though someone were laughing at me behind the door. Then, at constant intervals, the whole place moved (possibly certain vibrations of the traffic shook it), but it was a movement so like the other sounds of derision and menace, as though the place knew that I was a fool and hated me for my presence and for the thing that I had with me.

Somewhere a door blew to, and this puzzled me because it must be some inside door, and yet it was close to my ear and more sharply menacing than any other sound.

Soon, however, all my sensations rolled into one, my consciousness of the cold. I had neither hat nor coat with me. I was (you will remember) dirty and unshaven. Every draught in the world was circling about me, blowing round my forehead, creeping up my legs, stroking my arms.

Cold and hunger, as everyone has at some time experienced, have a personal force. When they are felt intensely enough they become individuals and wear, for the person who is confronted by them, physical aspects.

So now it seemed to me that the cold came down from the stairs, and crept in from under the street door, and began to flap a wet freezing cloak about my face. I was tired, overstrung, and it was not long before my imagination conceived for me that Pengelly also felt the cold and crept closer to me for warmth, but that he was colder than any cold and that I was conscious of his stiff naked body beneath his thin clothes.

Oh yes, those minutes at the foot of that staircase were of themselves extremely uncomfortable for me, but now something was to happen which made them infinitely worse.

The street door was pushed open—the noise of the outside traffic was suddenly a roar, the door was closed again, and a little man in evening dress was facing me. The light here was very dim,

and he would not have seen me at all had he not held the door open for a moment and let the outside glare in upon me.

But he did see me, and he stopped with a gasp. He stood swaying a little on his feet, and when he spoke I realised that he was slightly tipsy.

'Hullo,' he said. 'Who's there?'

I must have been frightening standing there, stiff and straight in the shadow against the wall.

'It's all right,' I answered. 'I'm waiting for a friend.'

He was reassured, I suppose, by my voice, and he took it at once for granted that I was waiting for a woman.

'All right,' he said; 'won't spoil sport.' He swayed forward so that he touched me. 'Damned dark here.'

'There's a light on the next landing,' I said.

'Right O!' I could see his face, and it was very young and very weak. 'Hope I'll get up there all right. Been drinking a bit. Too many cocktails.'

'Yes,' I said. For the life of me I could not keep my teeth from chattering. It was then, I think, that it struck him that there was something unusual about my immobility. He peered a little closer.

'Cold spot you've chosen. No business of mine.'

I didn't reply. I was at this moment so badly overwrought and nervously alarmed that for tuppence I would have caught him by the scruff of his neck and thrown him up the stairs. Buller

might return at any moment. What if the young fool were still here and insisted on remaining.

'Well,' he repeated. 'No business of mine. Late already. Major Escott's flat. Number three. Next floor, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I answered sharply, having a wild hysterical desire to laugh. Suppose this ass climbed up and rang the bell of Osmund's flat and in his drunken humour insisted that it was the one he wanted! Oh well, I had the body here—that was one comfort.

But it was no comfort at all, for, with another lurch, he peered into the dusk and saw the huddled shadow at my feet.

'Hul-lo!' he whistled. 'What have you got there?'

'That's what I'm waiting for,' I answered quickly. 'If you want to know, it's a pal of mine drunk himself silly. Someone's gone to fetch his car—it's parked round the corner—we'll put him into it and take him home.'

'My *word*!' The young ass was deeply interested. 'And I thought it was a girl you were waiting for. By Jove, he does look bad! Too many cocktails, that's what I've been having—and before the party's even started. We're going to make a night of it. It's Escott's birthday—lots of people coming in later on, but *we're* dining . . .'

He broke off. Something seemed to tell him that Pengelly's immobility was rather remarkable.

'He *is* bad. Gone off in a sort of stupor or something.'

My nerves were at breaking point.

'He'll be all right,' I snapped out, 'once we get him home.'

Then the most terrible thing happened. He fumbled in his pocket, produced a cigarette-case and a lighter. He took out a cigarette, then there was a flare of light. He looked over the little flame—straight into Pengelly's face. The head had rolled back, the hat tumbled sideways, the face with staring eyes, the tip of the tongue jutting out between the teeth, the cheeks a dead yellow—this was what the young man saw. The light went out. The cigarette dropped to the ground.

'My God!' he whispered. 'He's dead!'

Had he, in that moment of illumination, looked at my face? I didn't know.

I moved forward. He turned, as though he thought I was going to strike him, up the staircase.

'Rot!' I said. 'He's only dead drunk. He fell and struck his head. He'll be as right as anything in the morning.'

But the young man was gone. I was alone once more.

Only for a moment. The door opened, and, to my intense relief, this time it was Buller.

Without a word we had Pengelly between us, had passed into the brilliant light of the street, had placed Pengelly in the dark corner of the back seat, the head once more lowered, the hat once more obscuring the face.

No one noticed us. The crowd was now thick, and to my eyes and ears, after that awful

ten minutes, seemed to have the vitality and colour of a flaming, shouting miracle.

I had one glimpse of Buller as, his face sternly set, his thick, strong bullet head stiff with courage and resolve, he stared to see that his path was clear.

Then the car moved forward, and I was alone.

BOOK II

CHAPTER VIII

SHADOW PURSUING

I DID not at once realise that I was at last alone. It seemed to me that all of them—Buller, Osmund, Hench, Helen—were yet at my side as I pushed into the flaming, icy stream. For that, I remember, was how it just seemed to me—to be flaming with light and brilliant with cold. I was without hat or coat—I was terrified. I must confess to that now, for this was the first moment (although it was not to be the last) during this evening when I was quaking, panic-driven with terror. All that I wanted at that particular instant was to flee, to hide myself, to bury myself, to escape from every kind of contact. It was not until later that the question of Helen, of my return to the flat, of my involving myself once more in the whole adventure, began to persecute me. I had in that first moment no thought at all of Helen. I thought only of myself.

And here, if you will forgive me for an instant, I must explain that I had, for months before this, been a driven fugitive. No one who has not experienced it can have any true notion of what it is to be day after day, week after week, month

after month, without any means of subsistence at all, and to have beyond that no one in the world anywhere who cares the fall of a pin whether you have subsistence or no—but, worse than that, far, far worse, is to be, at my age, without any means at all of filling the twenty-four hours—day after day stretching in front of you, naked, bare, and of an infinite, infinite length.

Many English officers who had deserved something of their country were in this state after the war until a lucky job found them, or, more probably, death from sickness, despair, suicide. I know that it was very easily said by those who were more secure that it was simple enough for these men to find some kind of work, that it was only, often enough, a kind of effete snobbishness that prevented them.

But that simply was not the truth. Thousands of men were ready for any job, were ready at last, I fear, for almost any degradation . . . that recurring emptiness of the endless succeeding days beats any Chinese torture for long-drawn malignity.

Well, I had been like that, and it had had its effect on my vitality, my vision, my courage and my sense of reality. I have written these words here because, looking back on this strange half-hour that I am about to describe, I can see that I was not quite in my sane mind—it is my unbalanced vision that I am trying here to recover.

The first reaction of that same unbalanced vision was to the light. I saw, as I stood on the pavement outside that door, from a clock on the

opposite side of the street that it was only half-past eight. Only a quarter of an hour, then, had passed since that meeting with Helen and the awful descent of those stairs. Unbelievable, incredible fact! It seemed to me that I had been plunged into an icily chill well of darkness with my huddled companion for hours of time. But there in the face of that clock were the facts.

Anyway, I had been in darkness and now was blinded with light. I had been in silence and now was deafened with sound. I had not at that time visited America, but I have had since then that dazzling and exciting experience, and I can well understand how dim and shabby an affair Piccadilly Circus must seem to proud citizens of Broadway's fantastic bizarrerie. I will go further, and admit that the Circus never after this evening was to have for me the flame and thunder that it had at this particular hour. My experiences of it were, thank God, never to be the same again! But now, as I emerged into it, I seemed to be held by a barrier of fire. I wanted to hide: on the contrary, every eye of that pushing multitude seemed to stare at me, and at my side, never leaving me, taking soft step in step with mine, was Pengelly's shadow. It was, as a matter of fact, the last ten minutes of one of the Circus's two most crowded evening hours. When I had gone out earlier to find Hench everything was preparing for battle. Now the battle had been joined, the restaurants and theatres filled, but already the tendency, which is now so marked, to dine ever later and later, was beginning to be felt, and there were the thronging

cars and cabs of the late-comers to the theatres, and a great, pushing crowd of pedestrians, released from shops and families and duties, flowing aimlessly from point to point.

But at first I could see nothing for the glare. Once again snow was beginning to fall, and I fancy that if one could have stood on a rock above the city one would have seen the great snowstorm of the later hour beating its way with wings of darkness from the salt shallows of the Essex coast. I saw nothing but lights. I bent my head beneath them. At the end of Shaftesbury Avenue where I was standing blazed above me on the left the letters of fire that announced the Revue at the theatre, and on the right, above the chemist's and the sweet-shop and the tobacconist's, were the dancing lights of red and green, the trickling gold stream of words and sentences, the trembling, dazzling figure of a gentleman who rode a bicycle of flame, faded into nothing, rode again, and faded again into darkness. Under this blaze the stream of men and women ceaselessly flowed.

From where I stood I shared with the crowd a position immediately under the windows of Osmund's flat, and my first quite absurd impression was that they had all gathered there because they were waiting for some sensational developments. I had the conviction, I remember, that if I looked up I should see Pengelly hanging, dollwise, out of Osmund's window, as the puppet does in Stravinsky's ballet.

'Listen, everyone!' I could hear him calling. 'They've tried to murder me in here, the dirty

dogs. They have indeed! But they've failed. . . . Come up and see!'

The crowd would stop and listen, and then they would turn and start pell-mell up the stairs, pushing, shoving, fighting to get a good view. I knew what crowds were like when there was something for them to see! Yes, and how like a pack of dogs they were!

Then I began to have the sensation that people were looking at me with suspicious glances. It was likely enough that they were, for I was dirty, dishevelled, without hat or coat. But it did not seem impossible that Pengelly was down there on the pavement at my elbow, shuffling along beside me, moving when I moved, coming to a standstill when I came to a standstill—I did not dare to turn round and look. But I had to get away from there, right away. I stared across the Circus as across a sea. The huts and planks of the excavators stood out, ragged and sinister under the blaze. In the black cavern of one of them hung a lighted lantern that was like the red eye of some dragon lurking in the entrance of its cave. The nakedness of those boards made everything all around them unreal. I regarded them with shivering apprehension.

The safe place for me was the Tube. There, in the bowels of the earth, I could be free of this pursuing shadow. I could speed away to some secure suburb with a comforting name like Balham or Ealing. There I would find shelter. Someone would be kind to me. I would work myself boneless for any kind stranger. What I wanted

was kindliness, friendliness, warmth—and to forget utterly and for ever that moment when Pengelly hung in mid-air, his legs kicking, or that other moment, later, when the young man staring over the flare of his lighter saw that yellow face and that protruding tongue.

I hurried across the Circus feeling that a million startled eyes followed me, and when I reached the entrance to the Tube I paused, breathless as though I had been a hundred miles.

But, all my life long, I shall remember with kindness that sheltering porch, for here, for the first time, I had a sense of protection. My pursuers seemed for a while to have stayed their chase. I stood back against the wall while the crowds passed up and down the steps behind me, and recovered a little my self-possession.

Very quickly there followed the accusing question.

'What are you doing? You are running away. You have left the woman whom you profess to love in a situation of extreme danger. You must go back.' I would not go back. No, I would not go back.

'I beg your pardon?' said someone standing beside me. I looked up and saw a fresh-faced, rather stout man nervously watching the Tube entrance.

'I didn't say anything,' I answered.

'Oh, I thought you did. Cold waiting here, isn't it? And it's nearly a quarter to nine. Damned shame, I call it.'

'Yes,' I answered, taking refuge in his company.

'Rummy things women,' he went on. 'Simply don't know what punctuality means. I told her —I won't wait one minute after the quarter, I said, and neither I will—not a minute——'

'Perhaps something's kept her,' I said.

'Oh, she'll have her excuse, right enough,' he went on. 'She's a marvel for excuses—'bus broke down or there was only room on top or some damn thing. Anyway, if she doesn't come in the next ten minutes——'

I couldn't help myself. The cold was awful. I shivered from foot to neck, and my head had a separate existence altogether, jerking like a mandarin's. He looked at me curiously. He had a jolly, friendly, unsuspicious countenance, and if he ever reads this and, looking back, remembers a hatless, coatless individual to whom he talked once some years ago for five minutes in the entrance to the Piccadilly Tube, he may as well know that I'm grateful.

'I say—isn't it a bit chilly without a hat or coat?'

'I just ran out,' my teeth chattered, 'for a moment to see someone. Said he'd meet me here. He hasn't come. I'll go back.'

But the curious thing was that I suddenly discovered that I couldn't for the life of me go down those steps into that Tube! No, I could not, and for the very good reason that at the bottom of those steps, just in front of the bookstall, Pengelly was waiting for me! For many years the

same man had been in charge of that bookstall. He was a rather large man, with a bowler hat tilted a little to the back of his head, and when you tendered him money he handed you newspapers rather as though you were one of the criminal classes. He meant nothing offensive, I'm sure, but there it was—I never could ask him for a *News* or a *Standard* without feeling that I had my best friend's silver spoons in my pocket, and that he was aware of the fact! Although I did not turn my head, everything behind my back was clear to me, on the left the steps leading down to the cloakroom, on the right the ticket-office with a little queue of people forming, then the steps, beyond them the bookstall piled high with gaily-coloured magazines and papers, and perched up in his bowler hat, looking out like a magician from his castle window, the stout-faced ironist. To the right of him, quite close to the magazines, Pengelly. Pengelly, for certain. Pengelly, with his small pale, vivid, snake-glance under the shabby hat, the waterproof hanging from him, waiting, quite motionless, until I came down. . . .

'*Evening News*, please,' says a little stout woman, holding up her penny, and the ironist, his bowler hat half off his head, looking over her contemptuously, gives her the paper. The lift gates clang! The icy wind with the snuffle of snow in its nostrils blows through the passages, but Pengelly does not move—he is waiting for me there.

'Well,' said the man at my elbow. 'Another three minutes I give her—and then—good-night all!'

I was absorbed in my struggle to turn and force myself down those steps.

'He's not there! You know he's not there. He was killed in Osmund's flat. Already perhaps Buller has thrown that body with which you struggled into the river. There's nothing there by that bookstall. You know there's nothing!'

But yes—he is standing there, and to the left of him, indifferently, obediently, the lift gates open and shut.

'If I were you,' said my friend, 'I wouldn't stand there any longer without a coat—I wouldn't really. You'll catch your death. Well, I'll be moving . . . ah!'

I felt his body warm with pleasure. He stepped forward. A pretty girl in a little fawn-coloured hat came to meet him. They held hands. I heard her say: 'I'm terribly sorry, Alfred—truly, I am. There wasn't a 'bus—they were all full, even on top. I can tell you I was fussing—I knew how vexed you'd be. . . .'

They moved away, her hand through his arm.

And at that I cannot possibly convey to you how wretchedly desolate I felt. It swept down upon me, like a voice from heaven, that I was for ever separated now from all mankind, ostracised, alone, abandoned. . . .

I cowered against the wall into the dark. They were going, those two, loving one another, into their own happy place, but for me there was no place, no home, no love.

The Circus moved before my eyes, and into it, about it and around, passed every

happy thing in the world—men and women by the fire, the stir of the falling coal below the lamp, the dancers turning cheek to cheek to the band's rhythm, the colours and scents and warmth brought for someone else's happiness, the door opening to a beloved voice, closing upon the intimacy of hushed voices in talk, bells ringing, dogs and cats, toys and coloured ribbons and tin trumpets, the slow realisation of the truth and fidelity of a great friendship, birth and death shared by will and desire, work done eagerly for another's glory, a chorus of voices singing, the tones rising above the hum of the traffic, and the measured tread of passing men—all *this* never for me again, because henceforth I was marked apart.

I went off with my head down.

I found myself outside the entrance to the tea-place where I had met Hench, and there, standing erect in the doorway, was old Father Christmas with his sign aloft, just as it had been all those years before Pengelly's visit.

I stopped.

'It's cold,' I said.

He nodded his head. 'Aye,' he said. 'Bitter. Where's your coat and 'at?'

'I'm over the way playing dominoes. Came out to the chemist's for a moment.'

He was really a dear old man, with blue eyes as mild as a cocker spaniel's.

'You must be warm,' I said, 'wearing that false beard for hours.'

'It's a bit ticklish at times,' he answered.

'But I don't complain—got to do something these days. Lucky to get this job. That's the way I look at it.'

'What are your hours?' I asked him. His nose was as red as a cherry.

'Four to ten. There's another man—ten to four. He 'ates the beard. Positively 'ates it. I says to 'im—what's a beard for a 'our or two? Makes 'im look silly, 'e thinks, and 'e isn't much to look at neither. But 'e's younger than me. Thinks it beneath 'im.'

'Nothing's beneath you if you do it well,' I replied sententiously.

'Just what I say to 'im. There's plenty worse jobs. On a cold night especially. Why, I'm all stuffed up inside to give me a chest. I'm quite a little man, really. Thin-made. Always was. And it's a blessing, all this wadding, cold night like this.'

He took away a little of my desolation. He seemed to find nothing unusual in my appearance. I was a man to him like another.

I knew suddenly what it was that I wanted to do. I wanted to tell him all about everything—yes, everything—and then to ask him—must I go back to that flat again, fling myself once more into all that horror? Would he go back if he were me? What use to see again a woman I loved when she was married to my friend? Maybe he would help me to escape from this terror, this sense of pursuit, this shadow of ostracism!

He was such a *very* kind old man, with his mild blue eyes and cherry-coloured nose. Had he

ever stumbled with a knee-knocking corpse down dark stairs? Maybe he had, and that was why he was so charitable.

'Don't have anyone much as late as this, do you?' I asked him.

'You'd be surprised. People come in for a quiet chop—*and* chat. Many's the marriage been fixed up in our place—quarrels too—plenty of them. I've seen 'em go up those stairs as 'appy as you like, and come down 'alf an 'our later all red in the face and separate. Aye, life's queer!' he sighed through his beard.

I wanted to tell him—what? Should I go back? Could I flee even though I wished to?

'Have you ever——?' I began.

And then stopped. His mild blue eyes bent amiably upon me, but, in an instant, turned sharp with suspicion. My words had made him uncomfortable. He suddenly, I suppose, began to put two and two together. Queer man, coming out of nowhere without hat or coat, a stubbly beard, said he'd been playing dominoes, frightened of something, nervous, staring about him, asking me whether I'd ever——

Something queer here. Don't want to be mixed up in it. Been mixed up with enough in my time. That girl down at Hackney. . . . That night I drank too much at the 'Peacock' and got mixed up with . . . yes . . . precisely. That's why I'm here now holding up a ruddy pole, dressed in a fancy beard, on a snowy night! *No*, thank you.

So my dear old Father Christmas was, in an

instant, a stranger. Oh, but removed from me a thousand, thousand miles! His eyes were frosty. His sham beard bristled with suspicion, the pole that he was holding was his weapon of defence.

That isolation again!—and even as I was aware of it I knew that Pengelly had left his post by the station bookstall and was turning the corner towards me.

'Good night,' I said abruptly, and left him.

I crossed to the huts, the planks, the scaffolding. Here Eros had once been, here had once been the stout flower-women with their roses, violets, carnations—now all was ruin, and a period in man's civilisation was closed. But I didn't care just then a hoot for man's civilisation. Ever more pressingly now was driving in upon me the question as to whether I would desert Helen or no. Nothing but that. Should I force myself back to that room—that room with the unfinished mottled walls, the blowing candles, the little ivory landscapes on the secretaire, and take up again all my responsibility for that moment when Osmund had lifted Pengelly into the air—or should I leave it all like a bad dream behind me, forgetting Helen, giving Pengelly the slip? . . . Giving Pengelly the slip? Even as the thought came to me I knew that he had crept into his shelter just inside the large dark canvas hood that crouched beside the hole where the red lantern hung. What a place for him to hide, here where the depths went down into the very bowels of the earth. In my fantastic apprehension I could feel the cold stiff fingers about my neck and those strong, wiry

arms pulling me down, past the lantern's red eye, until the air grew stuffier and the damp thick earth began to press into my nostrils.

I looked up and out, to the sky shining with leaping signs, to the walls of dark buildings, and almost exactly opposite me Osmund's window, a black square embedded in a darting field of red and green stars.

I almost ran across the Circus, hiding myself in the crowd, feeling nothing but cold, fear, and the inevitability of that pursuing figure. I turned towards the Regent Palace Hotel and saw on the right above my head in very large letters, 'CHINESE RESTAURANT.'

I had only my half-crown. I was no fitting person for any restaurant, but I was cold and frightened. I turned in and climbed the stairs. On the wall above the staircase were Chinese pictures, white marble backgrounds with sprays of pink blossom, bridges, temples, tea-houses, and underneath them English advertisements of Worcester Sauce, Corsets, and Trips to Geneva. As I turned the corner a girl and a man passed me, and she said:

'But what I say is you don't know what you're eating. It isn't like a good square meal you can give a name to.'

And what *I* said as I turned to the left into the restaurant was: 'I *won't* go back. . . . Oh, God! don't make me go back! I don't want to see that room again. I don't want ever to see——'

'Yes,' said the polite Chinaman in evening dress at the door. 'There's a place at that table

by the window.' For the room was surprisingly full, surprisingly for that hour, I mean. At every table people were sitting, and at the table pointed out to me there were a man and a woman. I went over and sat opposite them. I was next to the window. I could look down and see the curve of the Circus and the narrow street that runs to the Regent Palace. Against the wall of the street a woman was selling papers. She had a placard, and on it in large letters was this sentence: 'TRAGEDY IN A WEST-END FLAT.'

I shivered. Perhaps it was Osmund's flat that they meant. Buller's car had been stopped. They had searched it and found the huddled figure on the back seat. Or he had been caught with the body just behind Dirk's (wherever or whatever Dirk's might be) and now Osmund and Helen and Hench. . . .

'Is there much difference between the four-shilling and four-and-sixpenny dinner?' I asked the English waiter.

'The four-and-sixpenny is chicken soup,' he answered wearily and with his eye on the placard below the window.

'All right. I'll have the four-and-sixpenny.' (He's seen it too, I thought. Everyone must be talking about it.)

The pair opposite me sat demurely side by side. She was a thin woman in a red hat and he a stout, round-faced fellow, very English, very quiet and, I could see, very amiable. They might be an engaged couple, but if so they had been engaged for long enough; they were not romantic about

one another—simply quiet, kindly, content. The waiter had just placed in front of them large dishes of uncertain shape and complexion. One appeared to be a pie of some sort, another was a confusion of vegetables.

'Chopsticks?' asked the waiter. They shook their heads.

'I may as well go over and choose some of the silver,' she said. 'It will save mother the trouble.'

He was the quietest man I had ever seen—not only external quiet but internal—quite settled and contented. Yes, perhaps they were shortly to be married.

'It's just the same,' she said, 'since we were last here. Do you remember—that was the time we saw "Mary Rose"?'

He nodded his head again.... I had never seen better, kindlier eyes.

'No, but what do you think about the silver? Or shall I wait until you can come with me?'

'No, you go—no need for me.'

They began to help themselves. I saw that they were practised with this Chinese food, mixing it and knowing exactly what they were about.

Meanwhile I had been brought a bowl that seemed to contain hot water with fragments of naked chicken floating in it. I could eat nothing. I felt terribly sick. If that newspaper placard *were* concerned with Osmund's flat, then it would be madness for me to return there. The police would be there. I could aid Helen more easily if I kept away.

'That woman,' the lady in the red hat said,

'laughs like Lucy. Just as silly. It's funny—Lucy's laugh hasn't changed in all these years.'

'She's all right,' he muttered, staring into the pie. They had been married for years. They lived abroad. China perhaps. My soup was taken away and something put in its place. But my eyes, that seemed now to have some quite independent life of their own, would not leave the door. At any moment he might appear, his hat about his brows, his hands in his coat-pockets. And then what would I do? As he crossed the room, his eyes fixed on mine, ghost or no ghost. . . .

I saw that the stout fellow was looking at me. His gaze, which was (as always, I suppose) most kindly, saved my eyes from their terror. I smiled timidly.

'I beg your pardon,' I said. 'This is the first time I've been in here. I didn't know what to order, so I just had the dinner. But your things look awfully good.'

The woman was charming. Her thin face lit up as she talked. She told me what the things were. I don't remember now their names.

'You live in China?' I asked.

'Straits Settlements,' said the man. I never saw anyone that I would have sooner made a friend of.

'Does London seem very different when you come back?' I asked. But my eyes *would* shift to the door, and I knew that he had seen my apprehension, that he was the kind of Englishman whom nothing to do with facts escapes, that he knew that I was in some sort of serious trouble.

'Not so very,' she answered. 'There are always the theatres and one's friends and things going on.' She was very kind. How nice you are, I thought, not to mind that I'm shabby and unshaved . . . but she wasn't perceptive as he was, didn't know that I was in desperate trouble.

And then, how terribly, with what a maniacal desire I wanted to confide in him! To take him aside and say to him: 'Look here, an hour ago in a friend's flat. . . .' I pretended to eat my food. How I was to pay I had no idea! It did not seem to matter. And then it suddenly mattered to me terribly, for there, at the farther end of the room, under a hanging cluster of Chinese decorations, was Pengelly sitting. He had his back turned to me, but there could be no doubt of it. The hat, the waterproof, the thin, slouching figure. He was waiting for me, and when I rose to go he too would rise.

I began to tremble, and I saw that my friend opposite me watched my hands.

He said to his wife: 'We must cut the rest or we'll be too late. Anyway the preserves are too sweet. . . .'

He asked for the bill, paid it, rose.

I had the cowardice almost to cry out, 'Don't go! Don't leave me! I must tell you. . . .' I think that my lips even moved. She smiled at me, I bowed, then she started to the door. He followed her slowly, suddenly turned back, and then, his eyes gravely regarding mine, before I could understand, murmured 'Forgive me!' had caught my hand, pressing something into it. It

was a ten-shilling note. So he had thought that that was my trouble!

My head cleared. I saw that the man at the room-end was not indeed Pengelly. My fear slipped from me, and, instead, I had the strongest consciousness—I saw my volume of *Quixote* lying solitary on Osmund's refectory table. Of all the odd things that night that was perhaps the oddest, for the thought of that lonely rose-coloured volume decided me. I would go back. I could not leave it there. I should never forgive myself were it lost.

With my ten-shilling note I paid my bill, and five minutes later, in the heart of a profound silence, was ringing the bell of Osmund's flat.

CHAPTER IX

HELEN

I DON'T know what it was that I expected to see when the door opened—two policemen in the hall, Osmund and Hench guarded while the flat was searched, anything you please. . . . What I did see was the little place as quiet and reflective as a graveyard—and Helen.

I came in, closing the door quietly behind me. I must have looked to her cold, pale, dirty, desolate, for at once her movement towards me was one of protection, maternal, the kind of anxiety that no one had shown towards me for many a day.

'I thought you mightn't come back. . . . I hoped that you wouldn't.'

I looked at her and smiled. Oh! I was so glad to see her! The confusion and fantasy of the Circus dropped from me as I stood beside her. I was no longer afraid. I knew that I saw things sanely again.

Then I quickly perceived her own change. She was a woman of deep reserve and strength of will. She yielded to no weakness; at any rate, no other human being should know that she yielded.

But this last hour had done something to all of

us—' peeled a skin off,' as Unamuno says somewhere.

I did not know at that moment—I *was* to know very shortly—what, indeed, this last hour had been for her, something more disintegrating than I could then guess. But we were all—Osmund, Hench, she and I—people in another world now. The scene was of a fierce bright colour, the figures strange, every movement had a new echo. And the rules that we had to obey were new rules.

' Osmund? ' I asked.

' He's gone.' She breathed quickly, looking back at the sitting-room, whose door was slightly open.

' Mr. Hench is in there. He's sleeping like a drugged man. After you'd gone he began to cry. John gave him some brandy. He drank it, and quite suddenly went off to sleep. He's there on the sofa.'

I pushed back the door and looked in. The room was in a trembling, twittering dusk. There were no lights, but the curtains had remained drawn back from the windows; there was the golden shadow like starry dust about the room, and on the wall the jumping sky-signs. On the sofa where Pengelly had been, Hench was lying, his stout soft body shapeless like an undisciplined bolster, his head back, his mouth open, and out of his mouth proceeded a long-drawn, whining snore. This snore filled the whole flat with its regular rhythmical beat.

' We'll go into the bedroom,' she said. ' It's better to leave him.'

I followed her. We closed the door, and then sat on the bed side by side.

She began, in that low, deep, trusting voice that I loved so dearly.

'Oh, Dick, I didn't want you to come back—but I'm so glad you have. If you hadn't, I don't know, I don't see how. . . .' She looked at me, then smiling (a new different smile, a smile belonging to the new country in which we now were) . . . 'You're so dirty. Go and wash. It must be hateful being as dirty as that.'

I nodded and went through the room into the bathroom. While I washed I listened, and I can give you no idea of how strange that sound of Hench's snore was, dominating the quiet flat. Honk—Honk—One, Two, Three. Honk—Honk. That snore, too, was a snore of the new world, sinister, threatening, charged with meaning. . . .

I washed. I scrubbed. I brushed my hair with Osmund's brushes. I longed to shave myself with his razor, but it would take too long.

I went back to her.

'Now tell me where Osmund is,' I said.

'I don't know where he is. After you and Mr. Buller left——'

'No, but before that?' I interrupted. 'When you were alone with him while we were in that other room. What did he say to you? I want to know everything.'

'Everything?' She gave me one of her old ironical smiles. 'You won't know everything. No one can about this.' Her voice sank almost

to a whisper. 'That's why it's terrible—because there are so many things in it that we can't get at. The change—from the one world to the other—it was so sudden—everything now is unreal—*everything*.'

She paused as though she were thinking something out. She went on. 'We have very little time. John may come back, or—anything can happen. But there's a parallel with this—something that haunts me. Years ago I had a woman friend—only an acquaintance, if you like. I didn't know her well, but she was charming, sympathetic, kindly, intelligent. I asked her to stay with me in a flat that I had then in Kensington. The first evening she was delightful. We went to a concert, I remember, and both of us enjoyed every minute of it. Next morning the same; we talked, laughed, found that we liked the same things. Tea-time she went to her room for a nap before we dined. I went in an hour later and woke her up. She awoke, Dick, an utterly other creature—malevolent, rude, querulous—the very lines of her face were different. We had an awful evening; and next morning, after a horrible row in which she behaved like a fishwife, she left. I can't tell you how disgusting it was, how utterly puzzled I was, because there was no conceivable reason for any of it. Later I learnt that she was a hopeless drug addict. I've always thought that that instant, uncausable change in her was one of the most dreadful and depressing experiences of my life. Causeless, fiendish—How are you to believe in the human soul when a drug can do *that*? How

many worlds are there, and where is there anything to trust to, to put your hand firmly on? . . . We are wasting time, but that moment when I pushed past John and looked into that room . . . it was like that . . . a fierce change from one world to another that we hadn't asked for—and we've got to live in this world now always—everything is different ; there's nothing to trust to—anything can happen. . . .'

'We're not different, Helen,' I broke in. 'You and I.'

'We are. Better or worse, I don't know, but different anyway. And John—when he brought me in here to tell me—it was awful. Two things had happened. One, I was so afraid of him that when he touched me I could have screamed—and I'm not hysterical, you know, Dick. And the other, that I was so glad that Pengelly was dead, so frightfully, horribly glad! If only it hadn't been John who had done it! And all the time he was talking to me I was saying to myself: "You mustn't let him see that you're different, that you're afraid of him, that you hate his touch. He mustn't know *anything*!"'

'And did he?'

'I can't tell. But it was pitiful. He needed me then as he had never needed me before, and I could do nothing for him—nothing. It had been coming a long time, my terror of him, I mean. And yet—what I tell you is true—he is one of the finest, noblest men ever born.'

She put her hand through my arm, drawing herself to me:

'You don't know what it is to me to talk to you. I haven't had anybody for years. We've been driven from pillar to post. Even in Spain someone would turn up who knew about John, and everywhere it was the same thing—he saw his enemies round everything. The odd thing was that he never blamed them or hated them. He thought it right that they should hunt him.'

'They weren't hunting him,' I broke in. 'That was imagination. People are too busy with their own affairs to care. They haven't time or energy to hunt anyone.'

'Maybe. Probably. But what does it matter? If you think you're hunted you *are* hunted. A little imagination is enough. But he was hunted, in any case, by himself. He couldn't escape what he wanted to be, what he wanted to do. He was a prisoner.'

She paused, and we were silent for a moment. I remember that it struck me then how strange this quiet talk was after all the confusion and violence —the two of us sitting side by side on the bed, no sound anywhere but Hench's snore that had now become an accustomed element in our world, the things in the bedroom, the brushes, the looking-glass, the cupboard, and the two of us, moving —actually moving to a sort of happy tranquillity!

I dare say that it often happens that, after some awful catastrophe, one sits for an hour almost sleepily tranquil. The thing's done. For the moment all that there is for one is to stay and await the consequences. There really was just then nothing else for us to do, and, as I was to

learn afterwards, over her, as over myself, gradually was stealing the knowledge of how deeply we loved, and that, whatever the future might be, we had at least these moments.

I put out my hand and took hers.

'Tell me first,' I said, 'before the Spanish part, what exactly happened just now, what Osmund said, where he's gone. . . .'

'What he said? He just said: "I killed him and he deserved it. He was rotten all through." I said nothing. I could think of nothing at that particular moment except that Pengelly was at last dead. You don't know—you can have no possible idea—of the way that that man has haunted us. He never actually interfered with us, and yet he was always there. We were never free of him. In Spain—in Segovia, where we buried ourselves—he was there just the same. It didn't matter where we went or what we did. I always knew that he would turn up again.

'So that, when John told me that he was dead, I could think only that we were free.

'But, of course, we were not free. A moment later John said, looking at me in despair—"So he's beaten me after all. I'm damned for ever, and he knows it." I knew that the only thing for me to say then was that I was with him through everything, and that together we'd beat whatever came to us. But I couldn't! Dick, that was the dreadful, unforgivable moment of my life! The words stuck. I only knew that I would be loyal, faithful, but that the fear of him that had been growing in me for years had reached in this last

act of his the point when I could control it no longer, when it was stronger than I was.'

'Why were you afraid of him?'

'I had always been afraid of him. I don't think I ever loved him. That has been my sin from the beginning. I admired him, feared him, and couldn't leave him. In the old days I was always being drawn to him, and when he wasn't there I longed for a sight of him and the sound of his voice, and when I was with him I used to tremble—not at *him* so much, but at some power in him that was stronger than he was. Something that drove him to desperate things. All his desire for noble action, his love of grand things, his idealism, would be used and twisted to something disastrous. His very love for me, which has never faltered, made him irascible, miserable, dissatisfied.'

'Bad luck,' I said.

'Rotten luck. The worst ever. You know that I'm not sentimental. I'm not very weak either. I don't suffer fools as gladly as I ought. I've no sympathy for hysteria. But John could make me hysterical and weak and soft—not simply because I was so sorry for him, but because I didn't love him, didn't know how to help him.

'Well, this evening when I knew that I was afraid and didn't want even to touch him, I was so sorry for him that I could have flung my arms round him and kissed him. But there *is* something, Dick, about killing a man, something terrible and apart. The war was different. That was a world of its own. Men obeyed orders and

chances were equal. But back in rooms and quiet flats, with boys crying the evening papers, there *is* something frightful, horrible, that *is* devilish. And John's right. He'll never be free of it now, however loathsome Pengelly was. I'm the only soul in the world who could help him—and I can't.'

'What did he do?'

'He said that Pengelly wasn't dead—or wasn't so far as he was concerned. He raved a bit—that Pengelly and he were joined together for ever and ever. Then he began about not dragging the rest of you into it. That you must, none of you, suffer, and that he must go after Buller. I told him that Buller knew his job—better to leave him to it. I was out of it, Dick. I couldn't say anything to him that would help. For one thing—to be truthful—I was thinking of you. Every moment I was expecting to hear that you and Buller had been stopped—the bell ringing—some policeman's voice. . . . I've pluck as a rule, but those ten minutes in this room were too much for me. There were too many different things pulling at me. I felt that if I were only sure that you were safe I could deal then with the rest.'

It was at that point, I think, that we were both aware of this new element now flooding in upon us and drowning everything else—our love for one another.

We were neither of us either very young or very romantic any more. We have grown much younger since then. Life had been hard and

ugly to both of us for a long time, and we had both the sense that on the whole we had not been given a fair deal. We knew that least of all now were we having a fair deal, and that these minutes that we were sharing were in all probability the last of our lives together.

We were neither shy nor self-conscious, but we tried for a little while to postpone any personal emotion. There was something in all this more important than ourselves and our private histories.

'Look here,' I said, 'we are both sensible, Helen. There are only two things that can happen. On the one hand—the most likely thing—Pengelly's body will be found, Osmund arrested, and all of us publicly involved. If that happens we'll know how to deal with it when the time comes. What we've got to do is to leave that alone till it occurs. The other thing that can happen is that nothing will happen—Pengelly never found, no questions asked.'

'There must be questions asked,' she interrupted. 'Pengelly didn't come in out of the blue. He has friends, relations, wives, mistresses. Someone will want to know what has happened to him. In all probability he told someone to keep an eye open. He knew that we didn't love him, that there must be some risk.'

'That needn't worry us,' I answered. 'All we have to say is that he came, talked, departed.'

'Did anybody see you on the stairs?'

'Yes,' I answered slowly, 'I'm afraid two people did—a woman and a man. That would

be awkward. The man especially. He had rather a clear view.'

I told her about it.

'Oh, we're in a mess,' I finished up. 'As bad a mess as could be. It can end in everything, anything, nothing. And that's why I want to tell you now—because this may be the last five minutes together that we may ever have—that I love you, that I have always loved you, and that my loving you is the only grand, constant, faithful thing in my life.'

'Is it, Dick? . . . Well, I love you too, and have ever since . . . Oh, never mind when.'

I had the *Quixote* in one hand. I had picked it up in the other room.

'I wanted to fetch this, so I came back. I wanted to be with you, so I came back. One and the same. This is the world where you and I truly are.'

'Yes,' Helen agreed. 'If you said that about any other book in the world it would be literary—false. But that is sanity, that Quixote world. This other is insanity, and it is because the two are mingling . . . They are always mingling. My life, Dick, has been passing from one mad moment to the other, but always someone else's madness. We ought to have married years ago, had a cottage, children, dogs, grown potatoes, had daffodils on the lawn and a grandfather's clock in the hall—a down or a hill rising above our back door, and the sea not too far away. We would have gone to stay in Edinburgh with the Maughams or the Baggots or the Freers. Or we

would have motored over to see Jane Herries at Keswick, and she would have given us plants for our garden. You would have gone to Spain in an Austin Seven and written a bad book about it. Our eldest boy Richard would have chicken-pox, and Mary, the second girl, would have a talent for housekeeping, while Sybil would think of nothing but hockey. And you after ten years or so would see a girl at a dance with a straight nose and Titian hair, and you would love me just the same but kiss the Titian hair, and I would try to be sensible and fail for a bit and then succeed. No madness anywhere . . . everything sane and straight. . . .'

She turned her head from me and softly, leaning away from me, began to cry. Of all the things that I could have conceived her doing, crying was the last, the most impossible; I think, perhaps, she had never cried before. I put my arms round her. She lay against my heart. At last she said: 'And that's that. Don't be afraid. No more tears.'

But our contact was not to be broken. I remember that I held her to me as though my only hope of safety were in that. Then I did the worst of all my actions that night.

'Helen,' I said. 'Let's go. Now, while we have the chance. We can be abroad by to-morrow morning. We have our passports. There's nothing to stop us. I haven't any money at the moment, but there are your friends the Tessiers in Paris, they'll get me a job. Didn't you tell me once that he had a business in Tunis? I'll sweep

floors, do anything. Osmund won't drag us back into this. He'll take it all.'

But even as I said his name I stopped. I was ashamed. She sighed. 'Yes—it would be wonderful. Why be sentimental about it? If our consciences would let us we'd go. But they won't. We'd never have a happy moment again. I couldn't leave John now. You know that I couldn't. . . . No, Dick, I suspect that this is our last time together. Pengelly will be found, John arrested, all of us involved. We must go through with it just as we've gone through with everything else.'

'Oh, Helen!' I cried, 'what a muddle! Our lives spoilt, all of them, and for no fault of our own.'

'No, for our fault—always for our fault. If John had more discipline, I more understanding and sympathy—'

'You—more sympathy!' I broke in.

She nodded.

'Yes, that is what has always been the matter with me. The machine of my soul moves stiffly. When certain people are near me, round it goes, functioning with smoothness. How nice I am then, how understanding, wise, kindly! Another approaches, and every cog in the wheel is checked. I can comprehend only one-tenth of your human beings and have no charity for the rest. You could teach me. I don't think that you are very wonderful, or clever, or very good, but I love you, Dick, with complete understanding, and it's good for me to be with you——'

She took my face between her hands, stared

into my eyes, and we sat there, absorbed in one another, not hearing Hench's snore, forgetting Pengelly, forgetting for the moment Osmund, and not caring what happened next.

Likeall lovers, we began to recover the slightest details of our early meetings, and over the Circus there crept the oddest little rag-bag of trifles, the wind-swept empty village street, the sea pounding like a dream at the end of it, an avenue of trees with a carriage crawling towards a high stone gate, someone climbing a staircase and looking back, a pebble beach wet and gleaming after the departing sea, an Alsatian bounding across a green lawn in chase of its master, a novel read in a deep arm-chair, absorbing in its interest until the door opens, and, at someone's entrance, that interest is dead—a laugh, a cry, a call, a turn of the head, a wave of the hand—and, always encircling us both, that sea leaping upon the shingly beach, and those woods, still and deep, or blowing lightly or crackling under storm. We yet seemed to move there. As we talked, gazing at one another, hand in hand, all this present adventure was as unreal to us as it must seem now in retrospect often to myself. We had our moment, and we lived it to the full.

'Remember, Helen,' I told her, 'that whatever happens now we have had this half-hour—and remember that as I am now so I will always be.'

She shook her head, smiling. 'No. No one can tell that. If John gives me a black eye to-night, to-morrow you may be wondering that you ever gave me a thought. Always leave the future.

Make no vows. But you are right about this half-hour. That shall last for ever, and no one can rob us of it.'

We kissed and were so happy that the Circus burst into flame, the *Quixote* stood on its rose-coloured binding and danced for joy, and all the angels clapped their wings.

'And now,' at last she said, getting up and going to the looking-glass, 'for the next business.' She stared into the glass, and, with a cry, turned to the door. I turned also. We had both reason to be startled, for in the bedroom doorway Osmund was standing.

His soft hat was pulled over his eyes, and his coat-collar was turned up. He leaned against the doorway and seemed fearfully weary.

Helen went up to him and put a hand on his coat.

'Well, did you find him?'

'No, I found nobody.' But he was not looking at her. He was staring at me, and I expected in the next moment to be challenged and then perhaps to be overwhelmed with one of those fearful tempests of rage. He would kill me also, maybe, as he had killed Pengelly. But when he spoke to me his voice was infinitely kind and friendly.

'I'm sorry you've come back, Dick,' he said. 'It was good of you, but it wasn't necessary. And now you are back you must clear out—at once. This is none of your business, and I won't have you mixed up in it.'

How I liked him then, yes, loved him, although

I had been kissing his wife three minutes before and asking her to go off with me. Moreover, I felt no disloyalty to him at all. If he *had* challenged me, as I had supposed that he would, I would have admitted it at once, acknowledged that I had always loved Helen and had wanted her to go away with me.

The *Quixote* element of this strange evening was stamped with this—the especial honesty of Osmund, Helen and myself.

'No, John,' I said. (It was the first time in our acquaintance that I had called him John.) 'You can't get me out of this now. I'm in it as deeply as you are, and I'm glad that I am. I'm not going.'

'Indeed you are, Dick,' he answered, smiling, 'and you are going to take Helen with you. Get up North by the night train. The Lakes or Scotland. And wait till you hear from me. I can manage this alone.'

'Don't waste time, John,' Helen said quietly. 'Dick is not going and I am not going. Take your coat off. I'm hungry, and we must wake Hench up; you can send *him* up North if you like.'

Then the door-bell rang. It tinkled through the flat, striking us all three motionless. At the same moment, I remember, I noticed that I heard Hench's snore no longer.

'Wait,' said Osmund.

He went into the hall and stood there listening. The bedroom, I must remind you, had two doors, one into the hall, the other, behind us, into the

sitting-room. The bell rang again. Osmund opened the door. At the same instant I heard the door behind us opening, and, half-turning, saw Hench filling the doorway with his untidy bulk.

I heard Osmund's voice:

'Yes?'

Then a soft, mild and most amiable voice:

'I beg your pardon. Is this Mr. Osmund's flat?'

'Yes. I am Mr. Osmund.'

'Oh, thank you. I beg your pardon for disturbing you. My name is Pengelly.'

CHAPTER X

THE CURATE

So we stood, Helen and I in the bedroom, Hench in the door behind us, Osmund in the hall. No one moved.

Then the voice came again:

'My name is Pengelly.'

We heard Osmund answer quietly: 'Won't you come in?'

I watched him, a tubby man, enter. He had a round rosy face, shining (if he had been in an old-fashioned novel) with soap and water. His mild, amiable eyes were covered and emphasised by spectacles with tortoise-shell rims. He was bald on the top of his head, and had a dark suit, a little shiny, that fitted his limbs a trifle too closely. He was all smile and shining spectacles and stout thigh and small friendly stomach. A dear little man, a younger 'Pickwick'; had he worn a high white wall of a collar he would have made a perfect curate. His voice suited his appearance—gentle, urbane, humble.

'Please forgive me. Only a moment. I promised my brother that I would call for him here.'

I felt Helen put out her hand and touch my arm.

'Your brother?' Osmund answered him. 'I'm afraid I don't quite understand.'

'You *are* Mr. John Osmund, are you not?'

'Yes—that is my name.'

'I know that you know my brother.'

'You said your name——?'

'Pengelly. Joseph Pengelly.'

'Oh yes, of course!' Osmund smiled as though greatly relieved. 'Of course I know your brother. Do come in, won't you?'

Helen passed me and went into the hall.

'This is my wife; Helen, this is Mr. Pengelly, whose brother we know.'

If Helen was there I must be there also.

'And this is a friend of mine, Mr. Gunn—Dick, this is Mr. Pengelly.' We all moved into the sitting-room. I heard Hench make no sound behind me, but when we were in the sitting-room I saw that the door into the bedroom was closed and there was no sign of Hench anywhere.

The next thing that I noticed was that during my absence someone had put fresh candles into the holders and that they burnt with a steady, fierce flame. Everything in the room glittered and shone. Osmund strode across and pulled the purple curtains over the window. He went to the triptych of blue Limoges enamel and straightened it on the wall. Then with a delightful smile he turned to the little man who was standing patiently in the doorway.

'Do sit down, Mr. Pengelly. Have something to drink? Smoke?'

'Thank you.'

'Whisky and soda?'

'Thank you.' He sat down with maidenly precision on the sofa, and so mild and clerical did he seem that I remember that a whisky and soda seemed a very dashing thing for him to venture on. But I had read in the past tales and novels enough to be thoroughly familiar with the conventional milk-won't-turn-sour-to-day figure of the amiable-seeming villain. As it developed, this dear little man was, before the evening was over, to show a personality all his own. So he sat on the sofa and beamed on us. Osmund stood near the window, Helen sat on a chair close beside him, I in my corner where I had already been earlier in the evening.

'And what can we do for you, Mr. Pengelly?' asked Osmund. I shivered suddenly. I don't know why. The room was not cold, but there were draughts everywhere. But as I shivered I caught a quick, sharp impression of the little man, so that in a second of intuition I knew that it was true; this man *was* Pengelly's brother. I fancy now, on looking back, that it was a sudden glint in the man's eye as he looked out over the top of his glasses that told me.

He addressed himself, rather surprisingly, to Helen.

'It is exceedingly good of you, madam, to bother with me. I will really not detain you more than a moment. Has my brother been here this evening?'

'No,' said Osmund. 'I haven't seen him for

a long time. If you are the brother of the Pengelly I mean, you will realise that circumstances, past circumstances——'

'Oh, I *do* understand!' the little man broke in. 'In fact it is exactly that that made me so shy of coming here this evening. I am not, I must tell you, at all intimate with my brother.

'He and I have different ideas. I suppose most brothers have. But I don't want to bother you with that now. I only came because I happened to have lunch with my brother to-day. He said that he was coming here to see you and asked me to pick him up here. It's odd. You say that he has never been?'

'Not so far as I know,' said Osmund in his frankest manner. 'I've been out part of the evening.'

A jolt of apprehension shook me. Osmund had made a mistake there, I was sure—and I suddenly knew the little man on the sofa to be as sinister as his brother. I found that my hands, hot and damp, were tightly clutching my *Quixote*. I laid it down on the table near me. Why had Osmund been such a fool?

'Then my brother never told you he was coming?'

'As a matter of fact,' said Osmund, 'that's the queer thing about it. We have none of us seen your brother for a long time. You can scarcely wonder at that, Mr. Pengelly, if you know the facts.'

'No,' murmured Mr. Joseph Pengelly.

'So that naturally you can understand our

surprise when a day or two ago I had a note from your brother saying that he wanted to see me on a matter of business. I appointed this evening for a meeting, and have been all this time expecting him. I thought that he would have let me know if he had not been able to come.'

'Very strange—and you've had no word at all?'

'No word at all.'

'One would have thought that he would have telephoned.'

'Yes—but my name is not in the telephone-book.'

'Ah, that might account for that. But my brother prides himself on keeping his engagements. Are you sure he didn't call while you were out?'

'He said he'd come between seven and eight. I was careful to be in during that time.'

The little man sat up and smoothed his knee, looking at it reflectively. 'Between seven and eight? He certainly gave me to understand that it was to be later. He told me to call for him between nine and ten. . . . I wonder what he can have been up to?'

'I've no idea,' said Osmund, smiling pleasantly.

They looked at one another, Osmund and Joseph Pengelly, and seemed to like one another very much indeed. You would have said that this was one of those cases of instant mutual affection. But I had never throughout this strange evening had such a certain conviction of coming danger as I did at that second when they exchanged glances.

It suddenly seemed to me that everything was up, that we were caught like rats, and that nothing could save us. This little man like a curate knew everything, and was enjoying his prolongation of the agony.

My own point of view had now completely changed. I was no longer afraid of anything that might happen to myself. All that personal terror that had driven me just now like a frightened shadow round the Circus was completely gone. I was thinking now only of Helen. That kiss we had exchanged had altered everything for ever. I know that these lover's words are conventional platitudes, but in this instance they were absolutely true. Everything has been changed for me from that moment, thank God. But just then the only thing that I could think of was Helen's safety. I didn't mind very much what happened to Osmund, Hench and myself (except that, of course, I now wanted to live as I had never wanted to live before), but nothing must happen to her. She must not be dragged into this. That meek, smiling little man must not touch her; for all his amiability he seemed to me more dangerous than his brother had been.

'It isn't really of much use that I should wait.'

(He had a precise, meticulous, rather effeminate way of speaking, and although his voice was more cultured and his words more carefully chosen, there was something there that reminded me absolutely of his brother. They both reminded me of animals, the other Pengelly of a snake and this

one of a plump, sleek, amiably vicious cat.) 'My brother can't be coming now. I do apologise for troubling you.'

'No trouble at all,' said Osmund most amiably, gathering his gigantic body together as though he would usher his visitor out. 'Your brother was detained by something. He will come and see me another time.'

But the little man did not move. He was looking at everything, the candles, the curtains, the triptych, the oddly spotted walls, finally the secretaire.

He got up to examine it. 'That is a charming thing that you have there. I've never seen anything more beautiful. Quite a museum piece.'

'I bought it in Spain,' said Osmund, coming nearer. His voice had changed. It was weary, exhausted and dangerous.

Pengelly smiled. His face was shining with pleasure.

'I know nothing about old furniture, but of course anyone can see that these little ivory panels are simply delightful. Charming. Charming.' He touched them with his fingers, the gentlemen fighting a lion, the peacock, the stork, the toreador and the bull—'Charming. Charming.'

He saw my *Quixote* lying there. He picked it up and idly turned the pages.

'Well, I must be off.'

Then he stiffened. He put the book down carefully, turned to us, and, looking at Osmund, held something towards us.

'Mr. Osmund—Forgive me. But here is

a strange coincidence. This is my brother's pocket-knife.'

Until that moment I had not seen the knife. It had been lying there on the table corner ever since Pengelly (how many centuries ago?) had taken it out to cut off the end of his cigar.

It was a cheap knife of tortoise-shell with two mean little blades.

'Yes—that is my brother's knife,' said Pengelly quietly. Then he looked at Helen.

'I'm sure you will tell me, madam. I don't want to contradict Mr. Osmund's statement—possibly he had his own reasons for saying what he did—but do tell me—has my brother been here this evening or no?'

Before she could reply Osmund had answered:

'Yes. Your brother was here. I said what I did because I thought that my interview with your brother was between ourselves—no business of any outsider.'

I could see that his face was rigid with disgust. Further and further into low, mean, lying relationships was he to be dragged! There was no limit to the degradations that he must suffer! He had an impulse, I am sure, at that moment, to throw all caution to the winds, to out with everything! I thought in fact for a moment that this was what he was going to do. Helen, I know, thought so also. I could see that her eyes were fixed on me. Her thoughts were with me then as mine were with her. We were, at that crisis, nearer to one another than at any other time in our earthly lives.

Pengelly sat down again on the sofa, rather on

the edge of it, I remember, as though he wanted us to understand that even now, in spite of his discovery, he was about to depart.

He looked round and smiled on all three of us.

'Please,' he said, 'do understand me. I'm ashamed of the trouble that I'm causing. The last thing I wanted was to pry into anyone's affairs. It is all the sillier because really I have nothing to do with my brother. I hardly ever see him. It only happened quite by chance that we had lunch together to-day, that he said he was coming here this evening and would I call for him between nine and ten? We haven't met for months. I know that knife, though, because, as a matter of fact, I gave it to my brother.'

That was a lie. I was positive at once that he had never given it to his brother. It was not the *kind* of knife that this type of man would give to anyone. And because he was lying about this he was lying about a number of other things as well. I saw suddenly that not only had he not done with us, but that he never would be done with us. We were all bound together for as long as this mild-faced curate chose to bind us. Osmund came forward and stood towering over the little man on the sofa.

'I'm sick and tired of this,' he said. 'Sick and tired of it. Your brother—if he was your brother—came here and was here for an hour or more. What we talked about is not your business. I doubt very seriously whether what *you've* told me was the truth, and what I've told you until now was not the truth either. But now you know.

Your brother was here and went. I suggest that you go after him.'

Osmund was violent. His voice shook with suppressed rage. But the little man answered him with exceeding mildness.

'I'm Pengelly's brother all right, Mr. Osmund. You have every right to be annoyed with me. Only you might have told me the truth in the first place. Many people would think that you had something to conceal. Why shouldn't you acknowledge to me that he had been here? There was no harm in his coming here, was there? It is funny that he left his knife behind, though. He's always so very careful—too careful sometimes. But please forgive me. . . .' He broke off, got up and then stood close to Osmund. There was something very comic in their positions. The head of the one reached to about the middle of the waistcoat of the other.

'My brother,' he said gently, 'said nothing about me?'

'Nothing at all.'

'Left no message?'

'No message.'

'You can tell me nothing more?'

'There's nothing more to tell.'

'That's a lie.' The voice, shrill, piping, hysterical, came from the bedroom door. 'Pengelly was killed here—this evening—by all of us —in this room.'

It was Hench.

By God, we had forgotten him, all of us, utterly! His raucous snore had been the last that

I had heard of him, and on that snore he had swum, as it were, completely out of existence save for one moment. And now he was alive again, just as though he had been resurrected with a crick of little brother Pengelly's finger.

We all turned and looked at him. I remember that I felt an odd, tired sensation of relief. The thing was out now. No more lies. And the little Pengelly could do what he damn well pleased.

We all looked at Hench. He stood in the doorway, his small round face lit up with the glow of a fanatical lunatic. He stared beyond us all. Then he came into the room and plumped his fat body down beside Pengelly. He put his hand on Pengelly's knee.

'It's all right. It's all right,' he said confidentially. 'We are not concealing anything. What I mean to say is that we couldn't conceal anything if we wanted to. Your brother came here this evening and insulted the lot of us. So we killed him, and Mr. Buller took him away in a car. We've nothing to conceal. You can tell anyone you like, and if you don't, I will.'

'He was killed—here?' Pengelly asked, looking at Osmund.

'Yes,' said Hench eagerly. (He was irritated, I think, because Pengelly wouldn't look at him.) 'On this sofa. And we're glad he's dead. He oughtn't ever to have been alive.'

Osmund, who seemed quite undisturbed, went to the window, pulled back the curtain, and looked out. Then he turned, and said to Helen:

'Leave this to us, Helen. You're not in this.'

She shook her head. 'I *am* in this.'

Pengelly looked at Osmund.

'Is this true?'

'Yes,' Osmund said. 'Your brother asked for it, and he got it.'

Hench broke in:

'I know you all wanted to keep it secret, but you couldn't. I told you you couldn't. I know you think I've gone queer in the head, but I haven't at all. What I mean to say is that I'm no queerer in the head than we all are most of the time. I've been queer for years, if it comes to that, with this hanging over me. And so have we all. I knew that something was going to happen. What I mean is that your brother was a wicked man, Mr. Pengelly, a real wrong 'un, and he thought everyone was as wicked as himself. He did really. Well, of course, that couldn't go on. Everyone must see that. I mean to say, all we've got to do is to explain to everyone exactly what happened, and there you are. . . . It will be a relief to everyone that he's gone. He deserved what he got. He did really.' His voice sank into a kind of mumbling, and he began to bite his nails.

I had meanwhile been watching little Pengelly, and I saw one thing very clearly—that he had, all the time, known that something had happened to his brother and that the knowledge didn't disturb him in the least. His round rosy face was as innocent of distress or indignation as a cake of soap. He fixed his attention on Osmund.

'So—that's it,' he said to himself. Then to Osmund:

'Would you tell me—if it's true—how it happened? I have a right to hear, I think.'

I hadn't been sure up to that moment what line Osmund would take. He could still deny everything, declare that Hench was a hysterical lunatic, and throw Pengelly out of the flat. I was prepared to aid and abet him if that was his plan. But it wasn't. He stood beside Helen, and I saw him draw a breath of air into his great chest as though it were a relief to him that at last he should be done with lying.

'Yes,' he said quietly, 'you shall hear what happened. Afterwards—we'll see. But this was just how it was. Your brother—if he *was* your brother—wrote to us, as I've told you, to ask whether we would see him. We bore him a grudge, and we wanted to ask him some questions, so we invited him to come here. We were inquisitive, rather naturally, but before he came we had no intention, I assure you, of doing him any harm. We didn't like him exactly, but all that we wanted was to have from him his point of view about the action he'd taken about us.

'I want you to understand,' he went on gravely, 'that we had no wish to defend the ridiculous act that sent us to prison. Please understand that. We were, all three of us, the last to defend it, but we wanted to know why Pengelly had interfered. We had done him, so far as we could see, no sort of harm. Well, he came. He came and talked to us.

'I don't want to hurt your fraternal feelings, Mr. Pengelly, but in a little while it became apparent that your brother, feeling that he had us all in his pocket, thought that he could do what he liked with us. That was insulting. And then, when he explained clearly his intentions for us—his idea was that we should associate with him in certain blackmailing schemes that he had—his assumption that we'd agree without a murmur was too much for us. I was responsible for his death. No one else. I strangled him, and his body was taken away. Where it is now I haven't the least idea.'

There was a long silence. No one stirred.

At last Joseph Pengelly cleared his throat, took off his tortoise-shell spectacles and wiped them with a very clean handkerchief.

He nodded his head.

'So that's the end of my dear brother. I will tell you at once that it is a great relief to me. I absolutely loathed him.'

Helen gave a little cry. Osmund turned and looked at me. I spoke. 'You loathed him?'

'Yes—since we were small boys and he took my clothes off and made me stand for an hour in a bucket of icy water. Yes, I loathed him, and I would have finished him off myself if I'd ever had the courage. I kept out of his way, of course. Then he turned up this morning in my rooms behind the Museum. Made me give him lunch, told me he was coming here this evening and forced me to promise that I would come between nine and ten and see that everything was all right.

He had his suspicions.' He looked up, giving Osmund the oddest look of admiration and almost affection.

'Yes. You were the right man for the job, Mr. Osmund. You've got the strongest arms I've ever seen on a man. My brother was wiry, but he wouldn't have a dog's chance.'

I saw Osmund's eyes shrink with disgust.

'Now, then, Mr. Pengelly,' he said. 'You know the facts. You can do what you like. There's a policeman in Shaftesbury Avenue.'

'You mean,' said Joseph Pengelly, 'you'd like me to go. Well, I've no intention whatever of going—not yet. I'm in on this now as well as yourselves. A partner in crime. I'm one of you, whether you like it or not.'

'You are threatening us, then?' said Osmund. 'Just as your brother did.'

Pengelly looked at him anxiously, wrinkling his brow as he might when, had he been a clergyman, he discovered some casuist arguing against the immortality of the soul.

'Threaten? No, no. Please. That is the last thing. . . . Oh, but do understand me! We shall never get on if you don't. If you think that I'm the least like my brother we shan't get on at all. And it's so important for all of us that we should.'

He looked pleadingly at Helen, at myself, and even at Hench, who sat up on the sofa very straight, breathing through his nostrils, still snoring gently, although he was now awake.

'Let me try and explain,' he went on gently,

gathering us all close around him with a gesture as though we were his nearest and dearest friends. 'It's like this. I have always hated my brother. I have always had every reason to do so. When I was young I believed in God, the goodness of the human race, general integrity, spring flowers, and a number of other pretty and evanescent things. I did really. You must believe me, because everything else springs from that. There was no pose or ingenuous affectation about it. I thought that the world was a fine place for fine people. It wasn't from my own observation that I thought so. Our home was cheap and shoddy—my father and mother quarrelled all the time. My brother was a swine, a cad, a bully, a terror from the year one. It was my brother, I think, who at that time made me an idealist.

'I hated him so that I was determined to be opposite to him in everything. His was a very simple case, but I think a very rare one. He loved evil for its own sake—the Iago pattern. It was his only fun, to cheat, to ravish, to ruin, to destroy. I don't know where he got it from. We had decent relations—lawyers, doctors, clergymen—good blood in our veins. Some twist in his brain, perhaps, or a strain of genius gone wrong.

'Anyway, I swore that his faith should not be mine, and I was idealist, sentimentalist, romanticist.' He broke off, and looked at Osmund. 'I hope that I'm not boring you. This is really important.'

'You shall have ten minutes,' said Osmund curtly. 'Then out you go.'

'Thanks very much,' said Pengelly, smiling. 'It is possible that in ten minutes' time you won't want me to go. In any case life saw that it should smash my idealism. It set about its job firmly. I began to wonder whether my brother was not right. The war came, and I saw clearly that he was right. This world followed the war, and now I suppose there is no one with any sense or observation left in him who does not see that life is a cold, callous, sneering cheat. I don't blame life for that—not in the least—only now that I see how things are, I make my plans accordingly.'

It was plain to anyone by this time that little Pengelly loved the sound of his own voice—the parsonic and lecturing strain was fixed there firmly within him. He liked the roll of his sentences, the choice of his words, the effect on his hearers—but behind that simple and very naïve pleasure I detected quite clearly an iron determination and a cold unemotional purpose. I did not yet see what that purpose was.

'I don't understand,' said Osmund, 'what all this personal biography has to do with us.'

'You'll see in a minute,' Pengelly assured him. 'After the war I endured a succession of uncongenial jobs. I was clerk, secretary, lecturer for a Pacifist society, a number of things. I hated them all. I'm lazy by nature, for one thing. I detest to be under someone else's orders. I love to have my own free time. I perceived, of course, that in this post-war world there was no morality of any kind left. Everyone was for his own hand, no one had ideals any more, God had been reduced

by the scientists to gas and water, the sexes were sexes no more, everyone was selfish, lazy, and cruel. These things did not disgust or disappoint me. I had seen, through watching my brother for so long, how vile a human being could be. He was still abnormal because he was so complete, but he was only an extension of a general law.

'Extension of a general law,' he repeated, looking round and smiling at his phrase.

'I didn't hate him any less though. I hated and feared him more than ever. Yes, feared him! It is marvellous to me now to think that he's really gone, that I shan't see his beastly face again or watch his mean little eyes! I'm not a coward, on the whole; I'm not in the least afraid of any of you, for instance. But my brother—he was something quite by himself!

'Well, seeing that the world had gone entirely to pieces, and was continuing in pieces, with no wish whatever to put itself together again, I looked around for an easy, conscienceless job that would give me the freedom and idleness and security that I needed. You know that my brother was a blackmailer. I don't blame him for that in the least. We are all blackmailers in one way or another. But what I detested him for was that he had such horrible relations with his clients. He bullied them, frightened them, distressed them! I loathed the way that he threatened and abused them. You have done a good deed, Mr. Osmund, this evening, for many besides myself.' He looked round, beaming

upon all of us. 'But to continue—as I see that my ten minutes must be nearly up. I have never understood why, if you hold some secret that another human being is willing to pay you for, you should not have with that human being the friendliest possible relationship. You are, after all, bound by a common tie. You have with one another a rare personal intimacy. You have made a bargain together, and should be, it seems to me, on the best of terms. It is that kind of relationship that I am suggesting that we should all have together.'

I looked up and across to Osmund. I could see that he was forcing upon himself every instinct of control of which he was capable, but that this new tempest of feeling was very different from the earlier one. He had passed to a new world of experience in the last few hours, and he was now the aggressor: not any member of the Pengelly family.

His voice was quiet as he asked:

'You mean by that?'

'What I mean is simple enough, and I'm sure that you won't be offended at it. I have found at last that for which I have long been searching—a comfortable resting-place. I like you all so much. Not only have you done me a tremendous service in ridding me of my brother, but you are the *kind* of people I like. I admire your restraint and decency and forbearance. I become from this moment one of you. I keep your secret as you yourselves will keep it, and in return you, as friends of mine and well-wishers, supply me with the wherewithal—enough to keep me happy, tranquil and

idle as I have always wished to be. In a world that is certainly beastly, false, mean, without standards, our relationship will be one of the few fine, straight things. I shall value our friendship more than I can say.'

He looked at us all, once again, with an almost eager and yet rather tired smile of appreciation. I remember that I realised with an odd little shock of surprise, because I was confronted with a new sort of experience, that this man meant all that he said, that he did like us and respect us, and that he thought this an admirable plan by which to continue in our society.

What would Osmund do? Helen rose and put her hand on his arm. But he needed now no kind of restraint.

Quietly and with a contempt that penetrated, I am sure, the hearts of all of us three, he said to Pengelly:

'You mean that—about people, I mean? That the whole world now is vile, treacherous, false?'

'Of course I mean it—no one with eyes or ears can deny it.'

Then Osmund burst out:

'You are more evil than your brother—and more contemptible. Life is superb. Human beings are magnificent—in courage, in unselfishness, in determination to do right. Here and there, scattered among men, are wretched creatures like yourself and your brother. Conditions like these after-war conditions are fertile for such as you. A few of you can make a grand impression by your destructiveness, your cynicism. I am

myself perhaps no better than you. I have been dragged, step by step, lower down, but at least before I go I can see that you do no more harm.'

Pengelly got up. He went to Osmund and caught his arm.

'You talk like a book,' he said, 'and I like it—but you mustn't exaggerate. If you think the world a fine place full of noble people, I think it vile, false, rotten. Why should we quarrel about that? Perhaps if we are often together, you will convert me. At least you won't kill me as you killed my brother. I'm not worth it. And, after all, I don't want very much. A few hundreds a year and to see you sometimes. . . . But I will see you again. I will leave my card. And I will write. I am quite sure that we can settle everything satisfactorily.'

He gave Osmund a friendly tap on the arm and moved to the door.

Then three things happened, and I recollect them with some confusion. Osmund caught Pengelly by both arms (but not at all roughly), and held him. I rose and committed the action that all my life afterwards I have most regretted. While Hench—but I will come to Hench in a moment.

What I did, as well as I can remember, was this. I didn't know what it was that Osmund was going to do. I was afraid lest it should be another act of violence. I felt in my pocket, whether with simple absent-mindedness or for some purpose I don't know, but I pulled out and held in my hand, without, I think, knowing that I

did so, the pair of Helen's gloves picked up by me in her bedroom.

Like a silly fool I held them there, not knowing, my mind intent upon Osmund and his behaviour to Pengelly. Osmund saw them. His eyes rested on them, as though, with the sight of them, some intense and moving conviction had come to him.

Then he looked at me. I returned his gaze, and my eyes dropped. It was as though we both, for an instant, swung to some distant isolated place where we faced one another quite alone—away from all the world.

I let the gloves fall. They lay at my feet. I heard him then speaking to Pengelly, who stood quite passively, without attempting to move. Osmund said something like this:

'You shall have your wish. You shall never leave me again. You are too dangerous a man to be let loose on the world any more. This is, perhaps, the last act of my life—my only decent one—to prevent you from threatening anyone else.'

The third thing that happened was that Hench, whom once again we had all forgotten, was out of the door before we realised him.

He looked back at us and cried hysterically:

'Don't you see what you've done? We are in his hands for ever! I'm going to the police—and you'll thank me afterwards.'

In all the confusion I saw that here at last was something for me to do.

I was after him, but not before he had snatched his ridiculous hat from the coat-rack and was tumbling down the stairs into the street.

CHAPTER XI

THE SANDWICH BAR

I HAD intended to catch Hench by the turn of the stair, but I was stopped by an extraordinary rout of revellers who were rushing, with shouts and cries of joy, past Osmund's door to a higher floor.

They were revellers of both sexes, and were dressed, so far as I could see, in worshipful imitation of the ancient Greeks. I could not tell this with any certainty, partly because I was myself too seriously agitated by my own troubles to observe anything very closely, partly because they wore over their classical garments coats and wraps, partly because they were rushing forward with whoops and shouts up the stairs and round the corner.

There passed me, at that moment, some dozen, and these were all gay with cocktails, and were friends of all the world.

I should have been through them and after Hench had not a stout middle-aged gentleman with a face like a red sponge, an eyeglass, and a fillet of gold on his head, grasped my arm and said:

'Is your name Escott?'

'No, you silly ass,' someone shouted from the stairs. 'Of course it isn't. He's higher up.'

'Come and join us,' said the stout man, very solemnly, still grasping my arm. 'All welcome. Escott damn good fellow. Everyone welcome.'

I, in an agony of anxiety lest Hench should escape me, tried to shake myself free.

'You look a decent sort. Come along to the party.'

Then someone called: 'Come on, Toby, you fool,' so the stout man suddenly jerked himself into an extraordinary animation and went trembling up the stairs, with one hand holding on his gold fillet. From the next floor came a babble of riotous sound.

But now I was down the stairs, and a moment later had my hand on Hench's shoulder.

The contrast was extraordinary. After that noise and singing the street was like a stream of underground water. I looked up and saw that above the lights and the shadowed walls a vast black cloud was creeping across the sky. The line of it was marked quite clearly, cutting the pale, faint night just above the Omnibus Theatre and stretching over my head beyond me. There was no wind and it was icily cold.

I noticed the sky because, when I touched Hench, he was staring upwards. I noticed also that there was now scarcely anyone about. After the traffic and confusion of my former plunge into the Circus this silence was uncanny, but everyone was now within walls, packed tightly in the

theatres and cinemas, eating and drinking in the hotels and restaurants, talking, laughing, whispering, love-making, gambling, quarrelling—and safe from the coming storm.

The cold was bitter. I had snatched this time my coat and hat, but Hench had only his hat, and it did not surprise me that he should be shivering.

When I touched his shoulder he turned and looked at me, not apparently at all astonished that I was there.

'Come on, Hench,' I said. 'Let's go back. What's the use of leaving that fellow there for Osmund to deal with him? He'll only do something violent. Besides, it isn't fair—to leave him in the lurch.'

He continued to shiver, and then suddenly leaned against me as though he were going to faint. I put my arm round him. As I have said, he was a big man. I could feel his stout body against my hand, trembling with a convulsive shiver. Then he drew himself away.

'That's all right, Mr. Gunn,' he said very quietly, as though he were holding with me the most ordinary conversation about nothing. 'We'll go back in a minute, but we'll take a policeman with us.' His large soup-plate eyes searched my face with an anxious, hapless, friendly earnestness. 'What I mean to say is that it's much the wisest thing that we can do. You must see that yourself. You're a sensible man, Mr. Gunn, and you must see it's the only thing we can do. It would be hopeless to let that devil have a hold on us. Much better we should all hang. What I mean

is that I said you couldn't get rid of that devil by killing him, and there you see I'm right. He's turned up again, just as I said he would. Much better to end it once and for all, and as to hanging, I don't mind being hanged now. What I mean is, now Clara is dead I'd just as soon be dead too. Much better for us to tell the authorities. It is really, Mr. Gunn—you must see that yourself.'

To my horror he broke from me. A little man, his head sunk in his upturned collar, was passing us quickly, whistling. Hench caught his arm.

The little man started back and tried to shake Hench off. It must have been alarming enough when you were walking along, quietly whistling, to have your collar caught by a complete stranger at the corner of Piccadilly Circus at that time of the evening. And you must remember that Hench looked odd enough with his round, white face like a turnip-lantern and no coat. I fancy, too, that that heavy black cloud with its edge of steel and its threat of impending storm gave an unnatural gleam to everything, to the lamps and the flashing sky-signs and the faces of passing men.

'Here! What's the matter?' the little man cried.

'I beg your pardon,' said Hench. 'But there's a murder just been committed—I want to find a policeman. . . .'

'Murder!' said the little man, breaking free from Hench's hand. Then he caught sight of me. He found me reassuring. I was smiling.

I conveyed to him that Hench had been festivity-making.

'Oh, I see.' He smiled with relief. 'You go along with your friend, old cock,' he said, patting Hench on the shoulder. 'Have a snooze and forget your murder.'

'But it's true!' Hench protested. 'I swear it is. I'm not drunk. What I mean to say, I'm as sober as you are. But I've killed someone and I must tell the police.'

'Killed twenty, I dare say,' said the little man in kindly fashion. 'But I tell you what—you'll catch your death of cold standing about on a night like this without a coat. Why don't you take him home and let him sleep it off?' he asked me quite indignantly.

'I'm *taking* him home,' I answered. 'Only he's got this sudden craze for a policeman.'

The little man looked round him. A ghastly fear possessed me lest he should suddenly see one. Then we *would* be in a hole! But there was no policeman in sight save the traffic controller at the end of Shaftesbury Avenue, who, even as I looked, moved away out of sight.

'Well, I must be getting on. Late, as it is. So long. Forget your murder, Cocky.' He went off, whistling.

I caught Hench by the arm and took him without another word into the bar of the adjacent 'Monte Carlo.' Whatever was going to happen it should be out of the way of that cutting wind. The bar of the 'Monte Carlo' was practically deserted. We sat at a little table next the wall,

and of the short, stout waiter I ordered two large cups of coffee. (You may not know it, but you can order coffee in the bar of the 'Monte Carlo,' and it is the very best in London.)

Two nondescripts were hanging over the bar like rather shabby serpents, and one old man with an entirely white beard was seated at a table near us reading a *Standard*—that was all our company.

I took stock of the situation. This was in many ways the most perilous and also the most exasperating moment of the whole adventure. Here I was tied to this bloody imbecile. No other words for it. Hench was idiotic, he was crazy, and yet I felt for him a deep protective kindliness. He had suffered during these last years more than any of us. He had none of Buller's stolidity, of Osmund's fantasy, of my sentimentality, to pull him through. He was just the plain, ordinary man in the street who had been involved in a burglary, imprisonment, and murder through very little fault of his own, and had no capacity at all for dealing with these various situations. He was now as nearly off his head as to make no matter; he was longing to shout his news to all the world, and one whisper in a serious ear would plunge us all into quite irretrievable disaster—not only Osmund, myself and Buller, but also Helen.

You must remember that at this moment, in addition to my nervousness about *my* situation, there was a racking, ceaseless anxiety about the events in the flat almost exactly above where I was sitting. Was Osmund murdering the second

Pengelly? Was he submitting to a gentle system of blackmail? What part was Helen playing?

'You see,' said Hench quite suddenly to the waiter who brought him his coffee, 'there's been a man killed upstairs and I want to fetch the police in.'

This waiter was very odd in appearance, because he had one of the very baldest heads that I have ever seen, bald as the shining globe, with just one black gleaming hair set stickily down its centre. But he had hair everywhere else. He had two of the bushiest black eyebrows seen anywhere; black hair sprouted from his ears and his nostrils. I'm sure that on his Saturday bath-night he would be mistaken by his youngest son for the bear from the circus. He was fat, round, and perspired at every pore.

He paid no attention at all to Hench's remark.

'Sorry, sir,' he said, 'Very busy to-night,' and hurried away. Hench looked at me in a kind of despair.

'They won't listen,' he said, 'they won't believe me. They know that he is not really dead.'

I put my hand out and touched his arm.

'Look here, Hench,' I said, 'drink your coffee and then attend to me.'

He was looking at the old man so recently absorbed in the *Evening Standard*. He stared at him with a fixed and concentrated gaze. Then he half rose from his chair. My hand was on his sleeve like a vice. I was so exasperated, nervous and worried that I could have hit him in the face.

'Now look here, Hench,' and I saw from the

quick apprehension in his face that he realised from my tone that at last I meant what I said, ' I'm about sick of this. I've been more patient with you than you're worth. Try and think of someone besides yourself. If one of us plays the ass now it lets the whole lot of us in. Anything can happen at any moment—Buller be arrested—the body found—Pengelly's brother split to the police—Osmund do something crazy. How is it going to help anybody if you tell everybody about it? '

I saw that he was preparing to babble, so I just closed my hand the harder on his soft, fat arm, and then he sat there, staring at me, his mouth half open and what looked like tears welling apparently into his eyes and back again. I went on, dropping my voice because I saw that the old man had put down his paper and was looking in our direction.

' I know just how you feel and I understand your feeling as you do, but it's cowardice to run away from the thing as you're running away from it. Don't you see that? Pengelly's dead enough. You didn't cart him down three flights of stairs as I did. You can take my word for it that he's dead. Well, then, he's not only dead but he's rightly dead. There never was such a dirty swine. Think of all the thousands of people that Osmund's made happy by breaking his neck. What good is it going to do any of *them* if we tell everyone we meet? Why should Pengelly's brother turning up worry you so? Osmund will be able to deal with him all right. He won't stand being blackmailed for the rest of his life. So *that* needn't frighten you. Here, drink your coffee and come back with

me to the flat. Pengelly's brother will have gone. We can talk things over quietly. Pull yourself together, man. Remember we're *all* in it and must look after one another.'

I thought that I had made some impression on him. Perhaps I had. But I shall never be sure, because he broke out now in quite a different direction. Leaning closer to me and breathing right into my face (his breath, I shall always remember, was scented ever so faintly with peppermint), in a low voice he explained to me that he realised that I was his friend ; he was very grateful. He knew that Pengelly was a vile beast, but it was of our souls that he was really thinking. It was of everyone's souls, in fact, that he was thinking, and this horrible affair of to-night had only brought matters to a crisis.

For the last year or two Clara, his dear departed Clara, had been in constant communication with him, urging him to go out into the market-place, gather the people about him and tell them of the perils that lay ahead of them, the world rushing to perdition and ignorant of its ruin! The world, vicious, heedless. . . . His voice was rising, the old man was now most definitely interested; the bald and hairy waiter, his bow-legs under their apron widely planted, stood listening. Something must instantly be done.

'Right, Hench, right,' I interrupted him. 'I agree. I agree with every word you say. But look here, how will this do? Come with me now. Trust me. And I'll find someone to whom you

can tell everything. . . . How will that do for you? I'll get you the very man—only we must lose no time. You realise how important that is—that we should lose no time.'

'I do, I do,' he agreed eagerly. 'You are absolutely right, Mr. Gunn. What I mean is that we've wasted far too much time as it is. You are entirely right.' He got up and stood there trembling with excitement. I can see him now, such a striking figure with his small pale head and his large flabby body; you could see the joints in him where he was fastened together, a ridge here, a bundle of fat, a ridge again—rather as a Jack-in-the-box looks, sprung from his imprisonment. That was what Hench resembled now, standing upright with his startled sightless eyes.

But we were causing altogether too eager an attention. The waiter was possibly reconsidering those strange words of Hench that at first he had disregarded. I called him over to me and paid the little bill.

'Awfully cold night,' I said genially. 'We'll be having more snow.'

'Yes,' he said, not taking his eyes from Hench. 'Has the gentleman no coat?'

'We came in from next door,' I remarked easily, 'for a cup of coffee. We're going back again.'

'Yes,' said the waiter.

'Excellent coffee,' I added; 'no better in London.'

I gave him far too large a tip and hurried Hench away.

'Who are we going to?' asked Hench, now that we were in the street again. Before I could answer I saw that he was staring at a gigantic policeman who, not more than five yards from us, was commanding the traffic at the end of Shaftesbury Avenue.

I think that of all the perilous moments of that evening, looking back now across time, I can assert that this was *the* most perilous. I was affected possibly by the icy little wind that was now blowing about us, by the black massive cloud that covered now the entire sky, by the extraordinary silence, so that no one seemed to be speaking and even the buses and the few cars and taxis were moving in perfect stillness. That hush does drop every once and again over the London traffic, and at this moment it had enveloped the whole of Piccadilly Circus.

I believe that in the end it was the silence that saved me, that even Hench was conscious of it and suffered himself to be led by me rather than address that policeman. But it was a very near thing, a very near thing indeed.

Meanwhile, as I crossed the street with him, I realised that I had to find someone and find him speedily.

First of all, however, someone found us. We were on the edge of the pavement, about to cross the completely deserted Circus, from the centre of which the red lamps of the excavations winked at us with a sinister glow under the black sky, when I realised that someone had slunk up to our side, and there was a voice in my ear saying: 'Good

evening, gentlemen. Isn't there something you would like to see? Some way I can be of use?'

I turned and saw beside me a long lanky creature dressed in shiny black and, apparently, a cricket shirt open at the neck. He had a white bony face, long like a nut-cracker, and his upper lip was streaked with a moustache so thin, so wet, and so black that it looked like a thread of grease paint.

I had, in my time, passed hours of pleasure, profit and pain with the night-guides of most important cities, but never before had I encountered one in London. I had thought, indeed, that London was free of them. I was to discover my mistake.

'No, thanks,' I said brusquely, 'you can't show me anything, and I'm busy.'

'I know you're busy,' he said mournfully; 'it's always the same. No one in London ever wants to see anything. What I left Paris for I can't imagine. You mightn't believe me,' he went on with a gulping sound, as though he found it difficult to swallow, 'but I actually came back to London because I was homesick. I was doing a fine trade in Paris, but I'm English after all, and it seemed rotten somehow doing nothing for the Old Country. I know there's people run her down, but after all one's country is one's country. That's what *I* say, anyway.'

He was gradually edging us away round the corner towards Regent Street, and I at once perceived the reason—it was because of the stout policeman in Shaftesbury Avenue. I saw then

another thing—that Hench's gaze was eagerly fixed upon our new friend. He also quickly discovered this.

'What about you, sir?' he asked Hench in a voice that was poignant with an eager and not altogether unpleasant pathos. 'Can't I show *you* something? I'm sure there's a house or two you'd like to visit.' He dropped his voice. I caught the words: 'Really cheap considering—no hanky-panky . . . the genuine article.'

Hench, his large eyes glittering, turned to him eagerly: 'I should like very much to have a talk,' he said. 'I'll put my case to you. What I mean is there's no time to lose—no time at all.'

The gentleman turned to me. 'It's cold standing about here,' he said. His voice had become now very confidential. 'And your friend's without a coat. What about a drink? Or, to tell you the truth, I missed my meal this evening. Too busy to think about it. There's a sandwich bar close by. What do you say?'

I was for the moment resigned. Had I only dared to leave Hench I would have turned and run back up those now familiar stairs again and stood by Helen's side to the very end—or the very beginning, whichever it might be—but my duty, for all our sakes, was first by Hench, as I very well knew. So we all three moved across the Circus.

'Storm blowing up,' said the gentleman, throwing a glance over his shoulder back to the policeman. Yes, that was true. A terrible storm. Not only was the cold bitter, but everything now

seemed to shiver under it, the lights on the walls, the doorways and windows, the few figures moving hastily on their private purposes, the cars and omnibuses.

The golden goblet, glittering intensely now under the ebon sky, trembled as it spouted its crimson liquor.

The gentleman was confidential. 'The curse of my country,' he continued, becoming with every word more confidential, his teeth chattering a little with the cold, 'is its lack of curiosity. Why, I ask you, should the people of London be the only people in the world who have no curiosity in anything? Why, if you were to walk stark naked down Piccadilly at midday no one would evince the slightest interest.'

He used words like 'evince' with a lingering, almost sensual pleasure.

'If,' I answered priggishly—you must remember that I was by this time almost crazy with anxiety and scarcely knew what I was saying—'they show no curiosity about the beastly things you want to show them, I'm glad of it.'

'Come now, come now' (he reproached me as though I were his long-lost brother), 'don't be so punctilious. What I say is that the thing we have to learn in this world is broad-mindedness. Human nature is human nature. Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.' (He reminded me, most adversely, of my beloved Sancho Panza in his devotion to comforting aphorisms.)

'Now I consider that I am completely broad-minded. My profession, I must acknowledge,

has made me so. Nothing in the world can shock me. I contravene all shockable possibilities. Shock me! You can't!'

I grimly wondered whether that were true. In a few moments I should be able to test him. Hench was feverishly hurrying us along. We turned up Jermyn Street in the direction of St. James's Street, and an instant later were beside the dimly lit little passage that did duty for a sandwich bar.

We could hear from where we stood the murmur of the Circus that was indeed only two minutes away, and quite suddenly out of the very heart of it I caught, or fancied that I caught, the shrill metallic cry of a newspaper boy. The word that I seemed to hear was 'Murder,' but I could not be sure of it, and, mingled with it, was an odd little wind that now, presaging the storm, whistled in and out of the traffic, blowing up against the window opposite that was filled with round-faced staring clocks, and wandering tittering away to the rear portions of the Popular Café that exuded always so strange a mixture of roasting meats and jazz music, coming back again to my feet, creeping like a nest of chilly spiders between my trouser-leg and the bare skin, and carrying always that hard shrill tone of the newspaper vendor. Was it 'Murder'?

It was only for a moment that I listened, but into that moment everything seemed to be crowded—the first Pengelly hanging in mid-air, the body stumbling against the stairway, Helen's kiss, the soft voice of the second Pengelly.

Such an imminence of hopeless ruin and disaster came to me at that moment, and I remember that only an urgent passionate thought of Helen prevented my taking to my heels and running for my life. . . .

But I heard again that polite, rather pathetic, voice in my ear—'Ham or tongue?' he asked. I found that I was standing right up against the counter. It was a lively, bright little place, and liveliest and brightest of all was our host, who had a rosy face, a merry eye, a mountainous stomach, all straight from Dickens. The little alley was so narrow that there was small room for his wares. Nevertheless, he managed admirably. Every kind of bright tin—biscuits, jams, preserved fruits—glittered from the shelf that ran the full length of the wall, and mingled with the tins were pictures of charming ladies, ladies of an earlier and a brighter day—Miss Gabrielle Ray, Miss Marie Studholme; and, in pride of place, dominating the whole with the cock of his hat and the wink of his gaily impertinent eye, no less a person than Lord Beatty himself. From two big urns steamed the fragrance of tea and coffee, and under glass was a collection of almost museum value, herrings embraced by slices of hard-boiled egg, glistening sardines, iridescent ham, and piles of sponge-cakes.

We were alone with all this glory save for our splendid host, and he was busied, not so much with his more obvious duty as with the writing of a letter.

We had our coffee, our sandwiches, and were

moving off to a small table squeezed into the only corner that the place possessed, when he pushed his red face over the counter and in a husky whisper asked us:

'"Ow do yer spell "different"?'

'I beg your pardon?' asked the gentleman.

'What I mean is—'as it two heffs or one?'

'It has two,' said the gentleman courteously, 'and only one R.'

'Thanks,' said our host, and disappeared again.

We sat down at our little table, and were forced to sit very close together. I could feel Hench's thigh trembling against my hand. The gentleman was extremely hungry. He ate his sandwiches as though he had been starving for weeks. That had but lately been my own position. I suffered with him.

The gentleman leaned across the little table, and, in his most confidential manner, said to Hench:

'And now what can I show you? The night is young. I can demonstrate——'

But *what* he could demonstrate will never now be known, for Hench interrupted him violently.

'What are we doing here,' he cried, 'eating and drinking like this? I don't know who you are, sir, but *who* you are doesn't matter in the slightest. This town in which we are sitting so idly is going to hell. The devil is abroad, and it is time that someone cried a warning. What I mean is that a murder's been committed to-night,

not five minutes away from here, and I can't get anyone to take steps about it. Let us lose no time. Come with me to the nearest policeman. Until this thing is declared openly there'll be no peace.'

'Nearest policeman?' said the gentleman. 'Not likely. They are no friends of mine, I'm sorry to say—narrowest-minded men in London. Want to stop everyone's fun. . . . What does he mean,' he asked, turning to me, 'about a murder? What's the matter with him?'

It was an impasse. If I denied Hench he would as likely as not burst into a scream, run shouting into the Circus, find a policeman, and bring the whole catastrophe tumbling about us.

'Ask him about it,' I said, and at the same time tried to convey to him that Hench, whether through drink or lunacy, was not to be trusted.

But the gentleman's attention was already drifting. He perceived that neither Hench nor I were likely clients; he had little time to lose and money to make. His eye was already on the street. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and rose. 'Thanks, gentlemen,' he said, touching his hat, 'for your generosity. One day I trust I may reciprocate. Meanwhile—business, you know—business.'

He bowed politely and moved towards the exit. The red-faced host stopped him.

''Arf a mo',' he said. ''Ow would you spell "mutton"—with a E or a ho?'

'Always with an O,' said the gentleman, and vanished.

After that followed pandemonium. I can trace only dimly the exact sequence of events. I must give them to you, I fear, in a kind of strange confusion, mingled with the odour of coffee and ham, the glitter of shining tins, and the cock of Lord Beatty's cap.

The little alley seemed to be suddenly crowded. Certain figures stand out very clearly in my mind: a chauffeur, thick-set and cocky, with that appearance given to all mechanics of a certain superiority to human beings (who are—alas—poor things, so fallible beside machinery); a small page-boy from a hotel, packed into a sky-blue uniform shiny with buttons; and a rather shabby taxi-driver who had a muffler round his throat, and a small, rather pathetic, baby face with red watery eyes. All these figures I remember, and I recollect, too, that I noticed, even in the middle of my agitation, the shy but at the same time self-assertive glances shot at the chauffeur by the taxi-man.

There were there also a woman and an old man —all crowding about the bar, raising the round rough cups of tea and coffee solemnly to their lips and gulping chunks of sandwich, all very friendly, passing courteously the time of day, everyone speaking of the bitter cold.

Into this warm social friendliness Hench burst, and not only Hench, but all the alarm, discomfort, even terror that belongs to a human being who is in a state not human, who is battling for life in a sea that tumbles just beyond human shores.

I had seen at once that with the gentleman's indifference to his story burst the last bar to his

restraint. What was this life into which he had come, a life so low, degenerate, altogether lost, that it cared nothing for murder, nothing for conscience, nothing for the terror and loneliness of Hench's own soul? I made one last effort to quieten him. His eyes were rolling in his small round head, his hands clenching and unclenching.

'Steady, Hench, steady,' I whispered, putting my hand again on his arm. 'Don't you see it's as I said? Come back to the flat. You can do nothing here. See first what Osmund has to say. Take his advice——'

He looked at me, and I saw that he had overstepped the boundary. He was mad, crazed. He saw men like trees walking, he felt God's presence at his elbow, he would catch beneath his feet the tremble of the earth as it paused before it slipped down to the flaming hell that awaited it. He did not know any longer who I was, nor would he have cared had he known. We were all lost together.

He pushed over his coffee-cup as he rose, and it fell on the floor. The sound of the breaking china turned every eye in our direction. He tumbled into the middle of them. I can give you no orderly picture of what followed. If I shut my eyes and look back I see Hench's tall, stout, misshapen body towering among them. I hear his funny high cracked voice: 'The end of the world . . . the end of the world . . . God's vengeance. Killing is nothing to you, but God's eye . . . damned . . . the lot of you . . . damned . . .' and I can hear the host's husky good-natured

remonstrance: ''Ere now, mind the china. Wot's the matter with the gentleman? . . . All right . . . all right . . .,' the shrill half-frightened laugh of some woman, and then out of the struggling forms (for Hench had the taxi-man by the collar and someone else had Hench by the trousers) I can see the solid, thick, resolute figure of the chauffeur pushing into the middle of them, and can hear his quiet contemptuous tones:

'Can't you let the gentleman alone? It's all right, sir. No one's going to hurt you; not while I'm about. Come along into the fresh air. That will put you right.'

By now I had myself, I suppose, taken some step, but try as I may, I cannot *see* myself in that scene. I know, however, that Hench, his eyes blazing with a mad mixture of ecstasy and anger, cried to me as though I were hundreds of miles away from him: 'I *will* be heard . . . I *will* be heard. This is the end. . . . There is no death any more, only punishment. You may murder but you cannot kill. . . . We are all lost. . . .'

'Yes, yes,' said the taxi-man in contemptuous comfort, 'of course we are.' Then turning to me—'If he's your friend, sir, we'd better get him off quietly. Something's gone to his head.' I couldn't tell him that Hench thought that he had committed a murder and was mad with exasperation because no one would believe that he had.

Indeed, I could tell him nothing, for a moment

later Hench had broken from all of us and had run out into the street.

I followed him. He paused at the corner of Jermyn Street, then started to cross, at a sharp trot, the Circus. He was nearly knocked over by an omnibus which, in its turn, stopped my own progress. When I was clear again I saw that he was moving straight for the Trafalgar Theatre, most brilliantly lit against the black sky with the glittering words: 'THE CENTRE OF THE WORLD. . . .'

I was aware of a number of things: that the wind was rising in a fury, that flakes of snow were licking my cheek, and then, even as I saw Hench tumble into the pit entrance of the theatre, an astonishing thing occurred.

A figure, whom I saw to be little Pengelly, also running, vanished into the black orifice of the gallery entrance, and, a moment later, almost touching me but not seeing me, followed like dream figures Osmund and Helen. I would have called their names, but before I could speak they too had vanished into the gallery entrance.

Hench, Pengelly, Helen, Osmund, mechanical figures propelled by the storm. . . .

After an instant's hesitation I also slipped up the dark gallery stairs.

CHAPTER XII

AFFIRMERS: DENIERS

I MUST now, before I give you the strange climax of this whole affair—figures like the figures of a dream rushing before the wind into the black mouth of the theatre blazing with light—write as honest an account as I may of the only scenes in this whole story of which I was not an eye-witness. I said in the beginning that there was one such account to be given of necessity at second hand. Here it is, and the authority for it is Helen.

Naturally enough, Helen and I have discussed the events that occurred between my running out of the flat after Hench and my encountering them as they disappeared into the gallery entrance of the Trafalgar Theatre.

They were, from certain points of view, the most important events of the whole affair, and it is lucky that it was Helen rather than I who was witness of them, because Osmund was their central figure, and she knew Osmund as I could never know him. Know Osmund? It must be apparent to any reader of this narrative that I never knew him at all—from first to last he was a mystery to me.

So possibly he was to Helen, but he was a

mystery with whom she had shared every intimacy. She had held him in her arms, his head on her breast, not loving him, but having a great pity and tenderness for him; she had waited those years for him while he was in prison, cheering, comforting him; she had shared his exile in Spain with him, playing with him (for in the earlier time he was often merry and childlike, untroubled as a baby), watching despair and loneliness and disappointment grow and grow with him—and, most intimate thing of all, realising increasingly in herself that she did not love him, that she had never loved him, that the best of her feeling for him was maternal and loyal, loyalty for the misfortunes that she had shared with him, and that not only did she not love him, but she was increasingly afraid of him.

He bored her, too, sometimes dreadfully. He had, once and again, all the boringness of the monomaniac — going over his case monotonously, wondering eternally what had persuaded him to that mad act of house-breaking, the act from which all the evil after-consequences had sprung. I could see them, easily enough, sitting in some sun-scorched spot of Segovia or Toledo, he digging up his ' case ' as a dog digs up a bone, she staring up at the burning sky and wondering *when* would it ever end.

For Helen was neither a very patient nor a very sentimental woman, certainly not sentimental. I have always been twice as sentimental as she, and I am not really sentimental as Englishmen go. She has told me since that during the weeks before this

final adventure of Pengelly's death she had been making up her mind to the fact that she could not endure the situation any longer, that she must go away and leave Osmund both for her sake and his own. In her heart she had known for a long, long time that she loved me, and only me, but it was not because she had any thought or any hope of ever seeing me again that she was going away. No, simply that she was sick to death of Osmund, that her boredom with him had killed at last her maternal care of him.

She was in many ways a hard woman. Life had made her so, as it had made many Englishwomen of her day. The war had seemed to her so awful, so bloody and unnecessary and wasteful, that she was resolutely determined never to be cheated by life again. Or she thought she was. But tenderness would keep breaking in. My return broke up all the hardness; the very sense that she had shown me that she loved me roused in her again a great tenderness for Osmund, a longing to see him through his troubles, to protect him, so far as she might, from further evil.

Then the evil came. She was never quite, I think, to recover from the shock of seeing Pengelly's body there on the sofa. She was not, you see, quite as modern a woman as she pretended. Osmund's acknowledgement of the murder separated her from him for ever. It would not have done so had she loved him. She has often said since then that if it had been I who had killed Pengelly she would have felt as though she also had killed him, and would have been bound to me

only the closer. But it was that sight of Pengelly's body on the sofa that showed her once and for all that she had no kinship with Osmund whatever, that he repelled and terrified her. Nevertheless, with all that consciousness of distance, she felt a pitying tenderness for him too—pitying at first, and then he seemed to grow before her eyes into a gigantic stature, to stand out a figure almost of the old Sagas, like Siegmund when he has heard from Brünnhilde of his doom, going almost gladly towards it because he knows so definitely that there is no longer any hope for him.

He was, in this last hour, finer and of greater stature than he had ever been before. He went from her, but he went grandly.

Our recognition of one another, brief though it was, gave her a conviction of happiness that none of the other troubles could take from her. But she was sure, as she has often told me, that that love, hers and mine, was fated to end exactly then when it was declared. Those words exchanged so hurriedly between us in the bedroom were all that were to be permitted us. It must be remembered that through the whole of the scene that now followed she was convinced that she had seen me for the last time. She even pushed me from her mind with that effort of supreme concentration that was one of her finest attributes. She applied now every nerve and energy that she had to dealing with the situation that was in front of her, and to helping Osmund as best she might, although he was now far from her—dim, gigantic, like an allegory.

Then with the entrance of little Pengelly into the scene a new element came to her, an element of drama, as though, she afterwards told me, she were acting in the second act of a play, a play that she herself was at the same time writing, and it was up to her to see what the third act should be—not only up to her—up to Osmund and Pengelly as well.

So you may say that every conceivable element —forces of love, jealousy, fear, honour, restraint, pathos, pity, theatrical unreality, and an absolute realism—were working together in her breast at that moment when Hench left the flat and I, after exchanging that glance with Osmund, followed him.

Many times she has enacted the events of the following scene for me, and it is her version of the dialogue between them that I now give.

When the door had closed behind Hench and myself, Osmund turned to her and said one thing:

'So Gunn keeps your gloves for you.' She had not the slightest idea of his meaning, was not sure that she had caught the words rightly, for Osmund turned at once from her and said to Pengelly: 'Well, they are gone, and now we can attend to our own business.'

Pengelly answered, smiling, in his mild clergyman's voice:

'That's very simple. I've told you how I feel. I hated my brother. I'm glad you removed him. I want to be your friend—I admire you—and I suggest, the world being as rotten as it is,

that you should generously provide me with five hundred pounds a year in quarterly instalments.'

Helen says that it was now that she was aware that something besides the other Pengelly's death had happened to Osmund. She did not know at that moment what it was. She was to learn very shortly. But what she realised without knowing any facts was that Osmund had removed himself from her, that he had done with her and all his life with her completely. He stood there, his great bulk swaying ever so slightly, staring at her, exactly as though he were seeing her for the last time and were determined to memorise every part of her. And she, aware of that, stood tautly like a soldier on duty, erect, facing him. She felt as though she were saying to him: 'Yes, this is farewell. Whatever the outcome of these events, we at least are never to be together again.'

The triptych glowed in its lovely colour under the golden candle-light behind him, and he was part of the triptych and the triptych part of him.

But all he said was: 'Helen, won't you leave us alone a little? We want to talk.'

'No,' she answered, smiling into his eyes, 'I'm part of this. I won't go.'

'But I will,' said little Pengelly, suddenly sliding to the door. With one stride Osmund was on to him and held him as he had done five minutes before. With the grip of one hand he held him, then he let him go.

'You don't realise yet,' he said, standing right over him, 'that you are never going to leave me

again. I told you so just now, but you didn't believe me. I'm finished and you're finished too.'

'I see,' said Pengelly quietly. 'You are going to murder me as you did my brother?'

The little man showed no sort of alarm—very gentle and mild, but quite without fear.

'No,' Osmund said, 'not that. I don't know how this is going to end. The police may arrive at any moment, for one thing, and then we shall both have to act quickly. Or no one may come, and we shall be here all night and go off together in the morning.'

'Go off—where?' asked Pengelly.

'I don't know—over the edge—deep down. Where no one can hear you deny anything ever again.'

'Then you do intend to kill me?'

'We go together,' Osmund repeated. 'You the denier, and I the affirmer. You stand for the rest, you see—all the other rotten traitors who insult life by sneering at it and spit at human beings. I shall have done one thing at least with my life in taking you with me.'

It was then that Helen realised that Osmund had left all of us and the world to which we belonged. You may call it insanity if you like. I don't know. It is simply an alteration of values, when physical life ceases to matter, when ideas change their size, and when perhaps truths, real truths, are for the first time perceived.

But Helen, who was always exasperated by nonsense and pretensions, and the use of capital letters when ordinary ones would do, interrupted.

'Please, John, don't waste time. I don't know what you mean, and you don't know yourself. The situation is quite simple. This gentleman here thinks he has a hold over us and is proposing to blackmail us. I suggest that you let him go and allow him to do whatever he pleases. Tell the police or anything else. We refuse, of course, to be blackmailed, and when he sees how hopeless his plans are he may perhaps make other plans.'

That, so far as she can remember, is the kind of thing that she said, trying at all cost to be sensible. Whatever she had said, her words had at least the effect of turning Pengelly's attention entirely upon herself.

He looked at her, she says, exactly as the little clergyman of some remote country parsonage might look when begging for odds and ends for his Jumble Sale—a little humorous, a little earnest, and very determined.

'I don't understand either of you,' he said. 'Why should you use the word blackmail, madam? I wish you'd look at the facts for a moment. I think it very probable that you'll hear no more of my brother. I don't know how you've disposed of his body, but I gather that you have taken some pretty effective steps. If the body is not found by the police I'm sure you'll hear no more about it, for nobody will make any inquiries about his absence. He was universally loathed. He had not even a woman who really cared for him, and Lord knows women will care for anyone. That's proved by the fact that it was

I whom he asked to come and inquire for him to-night—when he knew I hated him. No, you'll have no inquiries. All that will happen will be that a number of men and women will slowly realise that at last they are free. There remains only myself. And I ask so little—five hundred a year among—how many of you is it? Four or five. And I dare-say I'll pay some of it myself after a bit if I get to like you very much. The truth about me is simply that I'm lonely and have to earn my living in ways that I detest. You can cure me of those two ills. In return I promise to be a loyal, faithful friend. You'll grow so accustomed to me that you simply won't be able to do without me.'

He looked at Helen with all the intimate humorous affection of old friendship. Then he turned, speaking gravely to Osmund:

'What you mean, sir, with all that business of affirming and denying I simply don't understand. I've been quite honest with you. I've attempted to conceal nothing. I do think the world a rotten place. I believe that we are a decadent race, that we have failed and shall shortly return to the air and water that has composed us. I find human beings mean, treacherous, weak and cowardly. But why that should irritate you I can't conceive. There's nothing personal about it, I assure you. You think differently. You're an optimist, although you don't look one. Well, I don't blame you for it. I like you the better. Why should we not agree to differ?'

Helen says that Osmund listened to all this with an increasing disgust and irritation that was

extraordinary to witness. It was now, she believes, that it was beginning to be driven in on her (just as, almost at the same moment, I in the Circus was realising this with Hench) that the events of the evening had acted as the breaking of the last barrier to Osmund's restraint. For years he had been holding the door against all the forces of insanity and desperation. His killing of Pengelly that evening had pushed the door in. And yet, as I have already said, there was perhaps a wider, clearer mind shining now in the middle of his insanity than he had ever known before.

He looked at Pengelly with a loathing greater than any that he had ever shown to his brother. 'You may not understand,' he said quietly, 'but my life long I've been fighting your kind of beliefs. I know life to be noble and grand although I have myself made a failure of it. You are only one of my enemies. It is you and your kind who have brought the world to the pass that it is in. You shan't be let loose again, I promise you, to ruin others with your dirty doctrines.'

He looked around the room, then he went out into the little hall, returned, flung back the bedroom door.

'Would you mind,' he said courteously to Pengelly, 'going in there for twenty minutes? The door from that room into the passage is locked. I shall lock this door behind you. But it will only be for twenty minutes. I intend you no harm. It is simply that I want to speak to my wife alone.'

'Of course. As long as you please.' Pengelly walked into the bedroom. Osmund locked the door behind him.

Osmund watched him go, then he went to Helen, put his arm around her, drew her face to his, and kissed her.

'Let's sit on this sofa. I want to say one or two things to you.' He drew her down on to the sofa and sat there with her, holding her close to him.

'You gave those gloves to Dick?' he asked her gently.

She didn't know in the least to what he was referring.

'Well, if you didn't, he took them. It doesn't matter.' He put his hand under her chin and held her face up towards his.

'You love him, don't you?' he asked.

'Yes,' she answered.

'And he loves you?'

'Yes.'

'How long have you loved one another?'

She couldn't tell him.

'And you've never loved me?'

She tried to explain. Love? What was it? What did the word mean? She did not know. But he nodded his head.

'Oh yes, you know. You've never loved me, but you stood by me through all those years . . . all the time that I was in prison . . . I think that very fine. But of course you would behave like that, it's your nature. Now tell me,' he went on very gently, 'if you *can* tell me, why did you marry

me in the first place, seeing that you didn't love me?'

Their closeness, the silence and intimacy that there was now in the flat, after all the storm and disturbance, above all, her knowledge that they belonged to one another no longer, all these things moved her greatly.

Very often the maternity that is so large a part of a woman's love is felt more strongly after the affair is ended than it has been felt during all its activity. There will be no things to do for this man, no more watching or caring or tending, and in that regret the best and noblest part of love seems to linger. So Helen felt now. She had never loved Osmund, but she had done so many things for him, and now in another hour or so she would do nothing ever for him again. And then, even while she was feeling this, she remembers that she was suddenly aware of the things in the room, the secretaire, the silver candlesticks, the strange ugly splotches on the wall, and realised that all these things had witnessed that action of Osmund's a short while before; she saw again the man lying on the sofa, his foot hanging limply to the ground.

She drew away from Osmund under an impulse so strong that it did not seem to be her own. He noticed it at once. Indeed, in an uncanny fashion, he seemed to know exactly what had been in her mind.

'You have been feeling kindly to me,' he said, 'because we are parting, and at the same time you have been thinking of what has been

happening here this evening. Now isn't that so?'

She nodded her head.

'And it's only an example of the way that you've felt to me always, I know. I've always known. Now we've only got a few minutes. We shall never have a talk again. I——'

'John,' she interrupted him sharply, 'what are you going to do?'

She remembers that a sudden conviction of instant danger swept over her—danger to Osmund, danger to me, danger to herself. The candle-light rustled in her ears, the floor swayed a little. She caught his arm.

'John, what are you going to do?'

'Never mind, never mind,' he answered impatiently. 'What does the future matter? I've done something irrevocable. I've no life of my own any more, whatever way I go. And that's why I want to make myself a little clear to you—so that you can think of me afterwards . . . look back and understand me a little.'

What he said was of such importance to Helen that she has tried again and again since then to remember exactly the terms of it. You must remember that I am giving it to you at second hand.

'Listen, Helen. I've never been on proper terms with this life. I've never seen things straight. I've always been, if you like to put it that way, a little drunk.' (He returned to this analogy, she says, several times.) 'Drunk with beauty for one thing. Ever since, as a kid of six, I stood with my old father between Penzance and

Marazion and saw St. Michael's Mount in a bronze haze and the sea purple and green around it. If one thing's like that, I thought, then everything must be. I was both realist and romantic, a sorry position for anyone. But one thing I did see clearly—that life's a fight between the setters up and the pullers down, the affirmers and the deniers. I wasn't sentimental about that. I saw it in the deadliest earnest. Although I could play about when I felt happy, I never had the slightest sense of humour, as you know. Well, here was the world busily engaged in the struggle between these two forces. I threw myself into the fight. I tried different religions. I went, as you know, to the Lepers' Settlement in Candia. I was at sea for two years, a Tommy in the Army—all the rest. I was a failure at everything because I was always too angry. I *couldn't* keep my temper. Everything was always just wrong; the deniers were always just winning or the affirmers were so damned complacent that it made me sick. And then I was mad sometimes. Crazy. I wouldn't call it so, but sane people would. The skin of life seemed to break, and I saw through, saw through into incredible beauty, but all of it out of reach, out of touch. That made me angrier than ever. I made friends and lost them. They were always afraid of me in the end, afraid of my tempers and furies and the scenes I made. Women too. They were always tremendously attracted to me at first and then frightened afterwards. They were always better than I was, even the worst of them, but they didn't want the things I want, didn't need

them. Oh God, how I needed them! Then came the war. There I saw some of my glories nearer at hand. But *after* it the deniers had it all the time. Nothing was any good any more, and just when everyone should have begun to build everyone was pulling down the little bit that remained. Then the jeerers, the mockers, the idlers came in. I tumbled against them everywhere. They laughed at me and I lost my temper and there we were. I think I really began to go a little queer then. Tiny things maddened me. I saw nothing in proportion. I don't know what you can have thought of me. But whatever else you've thought, I know you've never doubted my loving you. I know, too, how it's irked you—how often you'd have preferred me to hate you.'

'No,' Helen said, 'that isn't true. If your loving me had made you happy I would have been content—but it didn't.'

'Happy! How could I be happy? How can anyone be happy?'

She recollects how he tossed his head here in a sort of wild desperation, as though he were tied in somewhere and couldn't get out.

'Happy? No, I've never been happy, never for one moment in all my life. Even when you said you'd marry me I knew that there was a catch in it somewhere. When I've been gay like a child, I've felt that behind all the nonsense catastrophe was lingering. I've never been able to take anything lightly. When I try to explain what's in my mind I talk sententiously like a

lecturer. I was always, from the very beginning, at a disadvantage with you there, Helen, for you are so made that you can't endure sententious, pompous people. How I longed not to be! How often in Spain I've wanted to be so simple and direct with you and didn't know how to!'

She says that her conscience smote her now most terribly—she recalled so many times when she had been impatient with him—wronging him from her own crass stupidity. If she could only have loved him, how much she would have understood.

'And you never realised,' he went on quickly, as though he realised how brief the time left to him was, 'what humiliation and isolation those two years in prison brought to me. Coming to a nature like mine the result was fatal. They separate you, utterly, for even you couldn't know —how could you?—what it is like to be different from everyone—how you feel when people shout to you "Be like us! It is quite easy!" or scorn you, saying, "How dare you be like that?" when you would give your soul to be like them if you could! Or perhaps not—you have your own vision of things, something apart and separate, an angle for seeing life—perhaps you wouldn't lose it even though you had your choice. I was normal, though, in my love of you. I loved you just as any man loves any woman—and you didn't love me—did you—ever—one little scrap? Did you? Did you?'

Then he dropped upon his knees in front of her, had his arms around her. Because of his great

height, his face was level with hers, his eyes stared into hers, beseeching her, begging her—this last request.

And, miraculously, for a moment, the only moment in all their lives together, she did love him. She could never explain that afterwards, whether it were her pity for him, her commiserating maternity, or simply her sense that he was leaving her—for a moment she loved him as he had always wanted her to love him.

She forgot myself, she forgot the incidents of that evening, she had for a brief fiery instant an experience of what all her life with him might have been, of how she might have saved him, yes, and herself too, from all these consequences.

She felt the thrill of his own surprise at her response. They kissed as they had never kissed before, lip to lip, heart to heart, her hand on his breast, his hand about her hair.

He got up, stood away from her, staring beyond her to the windows.

'Good-bye, my dear,' he said. Then he went to the bedroom door and unlocked it.

For herself, a little thing pulled her back to me—the sight of my *Don Quixote* lying on the table. She picked it up.

Pengelly came in.

'I've been asleep,' he said, and he looked behind his glasses tousled and sleepy like a little owl.

Osmund said to him: 'You're coming with me. We are going away together.'

Pengelly answered: 'Indeed we are not. I'll

make you a prophecy. Within a week you'll be paying me my five hundred and glad to do it. Within a month you'll be loving me like a brother, better than my own brother ever loved me. . . . Good-night.'

He was at the door and through it. Osmund was after him. Helen heard the little hall door open, and then suddenly the whole flat was filled with pandemonium—laughter—songs—cheers—shouts.

She heard Osmund's voice; someone shouted: 'Yoicks! Yoicks! Tally-ho!'

A moment later she was herself in the passage, and it seemed to her that the whole world had run stark, staring mad.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PARTY

It must have been strange indeed for Helen to come from that quiet room, that intimate scene with Osmund, into the racket and confusion of this absurd and fantastic company.

She had at the moment, however, thought only for Osmund.

If that scene had meant anything it had meant this—that she would not leave him now until this thing was finished.

I had become for her something quite secondary so soon as she had realised that Osmund was no longer capable of looking after himself. She had about him the feeling—only a hundred times intensified—the sense that I was having at the same moment about Hench—that he was crazed and so was helpless in a world composed for the most part of sane and careful human beings.

But she could have been excused if, on coming into the passage, she had had at first the impression that not only her husband, but the whole world, had gone mad.

You must remember that she was not prepared, as I should have been, for that party enjoy-

ing itself at Major Escott's, No. 3 flat—(whoever Major Escott was). No, she was not prepared for any of those fantastic figures, Greeks of old, and most of them drunk before they ever got to the party at all.

The passage seemed to her to be filled with maniacs. Some were pressing up the stairs, some were pressing down. An extremely fat man, dressed, as it seemed to her, only in a night-shirt, with a wreath of bright green metallic leaves pushed to one side of his bald perspiring head, was crying out in shrill feminine tones: 'Come on, girls, we're late. We're bloody late. Oh yes, we're very bloody late indeed!'

Around him, like smaller fish about a friendly whale, were swimming a number of persons of various sexes and of no sex at all. There were two elderly ladies in accustomed evening dress who looked extremely anxious and disturbed. One very handsome youth with a gold fillet on his hair and a tunic that displayed most of his person, led a little body of worshippers up the stairs.

One anxious little man with an eyeglass continued to repeat over and over again: 'But where *is* Escott's flat? It's really too odd—we can't find his flat anywhere?'

Helen found to her amazement that by the time that she reached the flat-door both Osmund and Pengelly were being accepted as members of the party. Pengelly, she saw at once, had seized this chance as a means of escape. She could understand how admirably it served him. There was safety in numbers. Osmund could do

nothing in such a crowd, and, in the general confusion, Pengelly would be a fool indeed if he could not get away. She heard someone say to him:

'But it's quite all right, my dear fellow. You've got to come and drink his health. We're *all* welcome.'

A moment later she saw Osmund's arm seized by the very very stout gentleman.

'Come along, sir, come along, he'll be delighted to see you. It's Liberty Hall to-night—we're all going the same way.'

She was herself almost at once caught in with the others.

A fierce-looking, extremely bony young woman snatched at her arm.

'Where's my husband?' she asked indignantly. 'You ought to know if anyone does.'

'I'm very sorry,' said Helen, 'I'm afraid I don't.'

The young woman looked at her. 'I beg your pardon,' she said crossly, 'I thought you were Mary Petch. Come on. She's got my husband somewhere, and I won't have it.'

In the middle of all her anxiety and distress the sense of fantasy and bizarre incongruity that had been growing within her ever since her return to the flat that evening carried her forward. Moreover, if Osmund and Pengelly were to be involved in this party she must be involved too.

They all moved up the stairs together.

On the next floor the door of a flat was open, and from within came sounds of extreme revelry. They all pushed in. Helen saw that this flat

was on the same plan as Osmund's, but the sitting-room that had, in his case, played its drama to the tune of a few figures, a pair of silver candlesticks and a triptych was, in this instance, packed and crammed with people. The noise was deafening. A gramophone was playing, everyone was shouting and singing. Helen was pushed into a corner. No one paid her the slightest attention. She discovered that she was pressed close against a thin and very melancholy-looking man in a tunic, tights and sandals—rigid against the wall and apparently extremely unhappy.

'Why ever did I come?' he said quite suddenly. 'I knew what it would be like. I knew that I should hate it. And yet I came.'

Helen's memory of the scene becomes very clear at this point. She had an agonising consciousness of approaching disaster, exactly as though someone had cried, through all the babel, in her ear: 'Wait . . . you can't escape it now . . . you can't move. . . . You are helpless. In another second. . . .'

Like a nightmare when you are caught on a wide stretch of railway line, the train, with ever-increasing roar and bellow, is pounding towards you, your feet are glued to the rails, the shriek of the whistle is in your ears, the huge black breast of the engine covers your sight, there is one last scream, and then the horrid impact. . . . Her actual position was near the open door. All the furniture had been pushed from the room—there were no chairs; people were sitting on the floor. The only witnesses to Major Escott's taste were a series

of sporting prints, horses jumping ditches and the rest, that vanished into a disturbing wall-paper of crushed mulberry overlaid with Chinese temples. The little hall was packed with people, and the bedroom, it seemed, also. The drinks were in the kitchen and the bathroom. At least it may have been so. I do not know how much is from Helen in this description and how much from my own reading about such parties in current works of fiction—no novel of to-day seems complete without one.

Helen's only thought was for Osmund, and at first her eyes could not find him. She realised that a number of people besides themselves were sharing in the festivities without any knowledge of their host. It seemed as though anyone might drift in. This was before the time of the 'gate-crashing' agitation in the Press, but she perceived on this occasion what I in after years suspected, that many a party prefers to be with its stranger guest rather than without it because so often it is the stranger guest who gives animation to what would otherwise be too coldly a family affair.

She perceived, too, that although everyone was making a great deal of noise no one seemed to be very happy. At first, as I have said, she could not find Osmund. Then to her astonishment she saw him close to the distant window, his arm round the shoulders of a girl with red hair and almost no clothes, his eyes staring with a peculiar fixed intensity—at Pengelly!

She turned to look at Pengelly, and found him gazing upwards, his spectacles tilting forward to

the edge of his nose, looking into the fat flushed face of an elderly woman who was apparently threatening to pour champagne on to his head.

Now here is an odd thing. Helen knew that the little man, although he was gazing up into the silly face above him, was in reality conscious of Osmund's eyes, and concentrating all his energies on some plan of escape. It was for a moment, Helen said, as though she herself were Pengelly, and she realised with a certainty of knowledge that can belong only to your own consciousness of yourself that now, in this moment, he was, for the first time, frightened of Osmund. He had become quite suddenly aware that Osmund wasn't any longer, in the ordinary meaning of the word, sane, and that, because he wasn't sane, he followed no longer the ordinary lines of cause and effect, but that he lived in a new world in which all the rules were different. Even as Helen looked at him he dropped his eyes from the fat woman's face, and began to edge his way through the crowd, and Helen saw quite clearly now that his soul said: 'I've got to get out of this; I am in danger.'

She saw then Osmund's eyes follow him, and she saw them command Pengelly to stop, and Pengelly stopped there where he was, pushed about and jostled by the gyrating crowd.

She wanted herself then to get to her husband. Something at any moment might occur. No one could influence him save herself, and in that thought she had a curious half-pathetic pride. She has told me how she wondered, as she looked across that room at him, whether anyone else

realised how supremely he was above and beyond everyone else in that crowd—above and beyond them all in beauty, in dignity, in the larger share that he had of that divine fire—the fire that burnt in him and made him a failure and an exile. Gaol-bird and murderer—but the vision that she had of him then was a true one.

The distance across the room between herself and him was very great—she seemed to be quite hopelessly wedged in against the wall. She found that the melancholy gentleman next to her was speaking to her:

'This is utterly horrible,' he said, 'and to think that we are supposed to be imitating the Greeks!'

'Why don't you go away then?' she asked him, her eyes desperately watching Osmund. She has told me since that if she were ever again to meet that grave, melancholy man, walking quietly in fitting clothes in any sober place, or dancing madly wearing nothing at all, whatever he was doing, wherever he might be, she would recognise him. And she would remember exactly for ever every word that he said.

'I am here,' he said, with the saddest of smiles, 'to be a companion to my wife. That is she dancing——'

He pointed to a little girl with dark bobbed hair, a white garment half slipping off her shoulders, dancing with a fat young man; how she could dance when there was no space to move upon was difficult to explain, but dance she did with complete abandon.

'I am ten years older than she,' he went on. 'She has just discovered it. For three years she was quite unaware . . .,' then broke off. 'Isn't it hot in here—and outside it is blowing up for the worst snowstorm ever—and in Central Africa they are dancing also,' he added.

She didn't reply. She was watching Pengelly, who was edging his way slowly towards the door. At the same time, she saw Osmund embrace the red-haired girl with his arm still more tightly, and she was aware also that he did not know that he was even touching her.

It was her consciousness that he was ignorant of what he was doing that made her determined to reach his side. So she began to fight her way. And it was a fight. Many people had by this time drunk a little more than they were quite able to carry, with the result that personal histories, sorrows, victories, tragedies, began to declare themselves on every side. Osmund's was not the only murder committed in London that evening. The sense of nightmare dreamily grew now upon Helen's brain, so that it really did begin to seem to her as though presently she would wake in their quiet cottage near Evesham, and she would hear the birds twittering in the ivy, feel the cool morning air swing in from the window, and then see John Osmund in the bed beside hers lying in his deep sleep, his head cradled in his hand. In this room there was a big flat looking-glass over the fireplace, and in this glass was reflected, through the open door, the little hall crowded with people. How fantastic this crowd in the dis-

arrangement of its fancy dress! As Helen saw it through the glass it lost all appearance of humanity; the cries, the movements, the staring eyes, the naked arms and half-bare breasts, and white knees and thighs gleaming with sweat, these were part of inhabitants from another star who, in some Wellsian fashion, had been shot, bewildered and dazed, into this so different scene. The noise was deafening, but, as in a thick forest, beneath the glare and coarseness of the larger forest life there is a cool furtive underworld pursuing its own purposes, so now Helen, trying to battle her way through to Osmund, encountered subterranean conflict.

She had moved some steps forward when she almost fell over a large stout woman who, seated on the floor, was holding a large stout man by the sleeve and preventing him from rising.

'If you dance with her,' Helen heard her say, 'I go right off. You'll never see me again—you can make your mind up to *that*!' She did not seem to care whether she were heard by the general company or not.

Helen, stumbling, caught the stout man by the shoulder to save herself. 'I beg your pardon,' she said. He paid her no attention.

'But, Carrie'—his voice was filled with tears—'I'm only going to do the polite. You wouldn't wish me to——'

'Yes, I would wish you,' she broke in furiously, 'and you know I would too. Do the polite! What do you say about that? Do the polite. . . .'

Helen could not move unless this stout lady moved. She murmured again: 'I beg your pardon,' and at the same moment she pitched over the pile of cushions almost into her arms. Someone saved her from going sprawling. It was a man. For a moment they clasped hands. She saw that it was Pengelly.

The bewildering absurdity of *that* was beyond anything else that the evening had yet given her. They stayed together; they could not move, and breaking into their own urgency was the ridiculous history of the pair at their feet.

'Mrs. Osmund,' he said at once as though there were no time at all to lose. 'Help me out of this. If you help me I promise to bother none of you again. When I give my word I mean it. I've had enough of this.'

'You're frightened,' she remembers that she said to him.

'Yes, your husband is mad. That has broken my nerve.' Then he added breathlessly: 'I wasn't frightened until I came in here. When I was alone in that bedroom I wasn't frightened at all. It was a kind of game that amused me. But now—all I want is to get away and never see him again. You needn't be afraid that I'll come back.'

The stout woman had got up on to her knees. 'I don't care who knows,' she cried out. 'Where were you two nights ago? Do you suppose I'm deaf and blind as well as dumb? I know what she's been doing all the last month, the little sly cat. . . .'

The fat man sighed prodigiously. 'That isn't fair, Carrie. . . .' He began an excited, tearful protest.

'You see,' said Helen (she was, she remembers, herself now a little breathless), 'you ought never to have come into this at all. Why didn't you leave us alone?'

'I was his creature. For years I did the dirty work. . . .' He broke off. 'To-night I thought I'd try a little bit on my own. See how it worked. It hasn't worked. I'm frightened of your husband, Mrs. Osmund. Tell him anything—that I'm not Pengelly's brother—anything—tell him. Tell him. Make him let me go.'

The fat woman had found a friend. 'Come here, Grace, and take a look at the meanest liar——'

'But,' Helen said, 'we are all caught. Running away is no good.'

'Never mind,' the little man begged. 'Help me to get out of here. Help me——'

Helen looked up and saw Osmund at her side.

They stood, the three of them, forced together by the crowd on every side of them. Osmund looked at Pengelly. 'Haven't you been here long enough?' he said. 'Aren't you as weary of it as I am?'

Pengelly said: 'Let me go. I shan't bother you again. I'm sick of the whole thing. Let me go. . . .'

What would have happened then between them no one can say. Would Osmund have let him go and so saved the catastrophe? Helen

could never afterwards be sure of what exactly was in his mind just then, what he was seeing with his eyes that wandered restlessly like an animal's up and down, in and out, around the room, and yet never seemed to lose guard of their prisoner.

In any case, Pengelly might have gone, and alone, at this moment, but no one will ever know, for there was an interruption.

The noise was now frantic, but someone shut off the gramophone, and as that background of jazz faded away voices also fell. Then some woman shouted at the top of her voice:

'We're Greeks! We're Greeks! We must have a sacrifice! I'll be Iphigenia!'

Everyone seemed to be enchanted with the idea, and a little round tubby man who, Helen thought, must be her host, prominent now for the first time, came forward and cried:

'Grand idea—come on, everybody. We'll have a procession, and an altar and everything.'

They pushed a low little table into the centre of the room, laid a purple cushion in front of it, found an ancient guest with a white beard to be the priest, tied the hands of a pretty young girl behind her back, and blindfolded her.

A number of tipsy men and women stood in a row and began to sway backwards and forwards; with much laughter they began a drunken chant.

Then Escott, looking round, saw Osmund. 'Hullo, you, sir, you're the very man—the biggest man in the place. You shall be Lord High Executioner.'

Osmund instantly, like a man moving in a dream, went over to him.

'I don't know what the hell your name is, sir, but I hope you're having a damned good time. I'm jolly glad you've been able to come.' Then he turned and called: 'Hullo, somebody, where's the knife?'

Someone had produced a carving knife. Everyone was laughing. Osmund stood there, the knife in his hand, the girl kneeling in front of him. Helen wanted to cry out: 'Stop! Take that away from him. He mustn't be free. . . .' But there was another interruption. Someone cried out: 'I say, Escott, do you hear that?

And then someone else said: 'Bunny Warner has seen a corpse to-night. None of your Greek sacrifices. A real one. On the way up here.'

Everyone began to talk. The pretty girl, tired of kneeling, got up from her cushion, freed her wrists, and pulled the bandage from her eyes.

'What's that?' 'Bunny seen a murder?' 'Bunny done someone in?' Questions began to break out from every side of the room. Everyone had forgotten the game of the sacrifice. And Osmund stood there, the knife in his hand, without moving.

A young man, in ordinary evening dress, began to talk from the fireplace.

'Well, if you want to know, it wasn't so awfully much. I hadn't meant to say anything about it. All the same it gave me a kind of a turn.'

'What was it?' 'Oh, come on, Bunny, out with it!' And Helen says that she too

wanted to echo: 'Yes, Bunny. Tell us what you saw.'

He went on: 'Well, I don't know whether I rightly saw anything or not. I'm soberer now than I was then as a matter of fact. It sobered me up, I can tell you. I came in out of the street and was just going to start up the stairs when I saw a man standing up in the corner against the wall.'

'What kind of a man?' asked somebody.

'Oh, I don't know—an ordinary sort of a feller. I asked him if he knew which Escott's flat was, because I was a bit squiffy and didn't want to go ring up the wrong man's bell. Well, he wasn't too civil, and then I discovered that there was another feller, all hunched up, sitting on the bottom step.'

Some women gave a little scream and someone else said: 'How perfectly horrible!'

'I asked the feller if his friend was ill. No, he said, only dead drunk, and another chap had gone for a car to take him home. So I said all right, carry on. But just then I thought I'd have a cigarette, and I pulled out this thing'—he held up a lighter—'and the flame went up, and I saw——'

The young man paused. Someone cried: 'Oh, Bunny, go on, go on!' There was a breathless silence everywhere. Osmund never moved or turned his head.

'Well, I swear that what I saw was a dead man. You couldn't mistake it. His eyes and mouth and everything. I cried out: "My God,

he's dead!" or something, and he said: "No, he's only tight," and then—well, I scooted upstairs as fast as I could!'

Exclamations broke out everywhere. 'How horrible!' 'Isn't that awful!' 'Perhaps he's there now.'

But Helen had eyes only for Osmund. She saw him swing round. The knife dropped to the floor. Everyone was beginning to laugh and sing again, but the gaiety was gone. Nothing could restore it. Someone turned on the gramophone. Nobody danced.

Someone cried out: 'Come on, I'm going!'

She fancied that then people began to push towards the hall, but she couldn't tell because, in another moment, she was in the hall herself. In a flash she realised it. Both Pengelly and Osmund were gone.

CHAPTER XIV

FROM THE STARS DOWN

Sometimes, and even after this interval of time, I still dream of those figures flying across the empty Circus driven by the storm. The omnibuses are there, but filled with inquiring eyes, while a skeleton policeman, his hand one huge white glove, stands, arm outstretched, and all the lights of a maddened world dance like flies upon the dark walls of the houses.

Overhead the black clouds pile as though they would presently crash down upon this waiting, dying world. The little running figures are manikins rushing to hide in any dark hole that offers—and they know that they are too late.

This dream has woven its pattern into my waking life too, and Helen also has not escaped it.

I return here, however, to the moment when, myself pursuing Hench, I saw first little Pengelly, then Osmund and Helen, vanish, to my amazement, into the gallery entrance of the Trafalgar Theatre. Had I paused to think, I might have found it my immediate duty to secure Hench, but the sight of Helen was enough for me. What had happened I could not conjecture, but I knew that

the events of the evening were working now to their climax, and in that climax I must play my part.

It was by this time close on half-past ten, and the performance was so nearly over that the attendant had left the gallery pay-box, not supposing that anyone would be so imbecile as to pay good money for merely twenty minutes' entertainment.

So I sped up the dark stairs and arrived breathless at the door that opened on to the gallery. I could hear beyond me laughter and the voices of the chorus. A tall ancient with a row of medals stopped me.

'Standing room only,' he whispered in a voice combining military dignity and an affection for beer.

'All right,' I said impatiently. 'How much?'

'Show's nearly over,' he whispered. But I pushed past him and went in. One dim electric light hung at the back of the gallery. In front of me everything was dark, and then beyond that a blaze of light colours, moving figures, and a blare of music. I could at first see very poorly. A number of persons were standing behind the wooden barrier. I could catch no glimpse of Osmund or Helen or Pengelly.

I felt, I remember, lost and in despair. From the moment's vision that I had had of Helen's face as she hurried past me I knew that she was in a panic of apprehension. What to do I knew not.

I moved cautiously along and tumbled right into Osmund. He recognised me at once, even

in that half-light, and gripped my hand so tightly that it was all that I could do not to cry out.

He whispered:

'Dick. . . . That's good. I wanted to say good-bye to you. When the lights go out we will go too.'

I knew then that he was crazy in the sense that Hench was crazy. A thousand impossible schemes danced through my brain. What an absurd and at the same time monstrous situation! Where was Helen? Where Pengelly? And what was Hench doing down there on the floor of the house? Osmund was pressing me close against him. His body was absolutely rigid, like iron.

'Let my hand go. You're hurting me,' I whispered.

He released my hand, but gripped my arm instead. I tried to peer beyond him, and then saw that with his other hand he held Pengelly.

That seemed to me so absurd that it was all I could do, I remember, not to break out loud into hysterical laughter. There we were, the three of us, held there while the business of the house went forward—and there downstairs was Hench! What incredible farce was it that we were now playing? And yet I knew that to Osmund it was no farce, but the proper conclusion to a long sequel of misfortunes now to be, at last, properly rectified.

As my eyes grew accustomed to the light, I could see Pengelly's face more plainly. His forehead glistened with sweat. Once and again he wriggled his whole body as though to break away, but he uttered no sound, nor did he look at Osmund.

I gazed, then, desperately about the house. I could see now the long sloping line of the gallery packed with people, the boxes on either side beyond and below, and then, to right and left, the farthest ends of the upper circle. On the stage, as I shall remember to the day of my death, a Spanish scene was being played. This was one of those revues that our grandest and most individual impresario, C. B. Cochran, so pleasantly provides for us. It had, I have no doubt, all the individuality, gaiety, good temper and aesthetic taste with which his personality colours our rather pedestrian stage. I suppose that it had, but I am no true witness, for I was never to see any scene of it but this one, and, as you may imagine, my own vision was, just now, very far from reality.

But I got the fantastic impression that this Spanish scene represented the very spot where Helen and Osmund in their Spanish sojourn had been. What was there then? I can remember a black tower rising in front of a purple sky. At the foot of the tower a crimson booth filled with oranges, and in the centre of the stage a stone fountain tossing real water that splashed its pleasant echo about the theatre. There was a boat with tawny sails moored under the tower. Up and down the steps of the tower, figures very gaily attired were passing. In the foreground of the scene a very slim woman in a black mantilla was dancing—some men and women rattled castanets.

The scene, in its colour and light, was to me like a nightmare. The figures that were passing

into the tower would never return. They were leaving all that light and colour and sound for ever behind them; and on the other side of the tower, the side that we could not see, the water was black and of a soundless depth.

Of a soundless depth! I pulled myself back. I must do something—but what? It seemed incredible that the three of us should be standing fixed as though by strait-jackets in this mad situation, while all around us the ordinary sane world rolled forward, the ancient with his medals whispering to the fireman, who was yawning as though his jaws would snap; in front of me all those heads, all fixed, as you could tell, in a sort of senility of pleasure—that happy old age of the intellect when the senses are lulled, the passions warmed but not heated. And beyond them that blaze of happy light. The thin woman had ceased to dance, the stage was filled with whirling figures, the castanets snapped, the orchestra gently titillated itself, humming, as it were, a tune over for its own pleasure.

But it was not the orchestra humming; Osmund was whispering to me, whispering without turning his head, without lessening his grip on my arm. The words never ceased, so low that I missed many of them, slipping out into the open theatre, heard by Pengelly as well as by me.

'I always knew I'd do some damned silly thing at the end. I've been waiting for this. I knew that I'd have to make a protest, and men who protest are prigs . . . prigs . . . prigs . . . But I've always been one, Dick—you know that. I never

could laugh at anything. I can't laugh at this now. . . . I ought to . . . you can laugh afterwards. . . .

'And all these damned Pengellys. . . . I'd finish the lot of them if I had time. I bet there are scores more of them hiding under stones somewhere. They and their kind. It would be a new crusade . . . wipe them out.'

(I remember thinking at this point—Why doesn't Pengelly, if he can't break away, shout out, make a noise, call the attendant? He's had enough of this anyway by now, must have. Why doesn't he make the old boy with the medals fetch the police and end the whole thing? Here we have been all the evening circling round and round with the police in the very centre of our circle, and no one has ever said a word to them. As though Osmund had hypnotised them. As a matter of fact, I've wondered since then why Pengelly didn't call out at this moment—but he had, I suspect, too many little misadventures in his own past to wish for any personal contact with the police. And though he was, I suppose, by now beginning to realise his own extreme danger, he still trusted to his wits to pull him out of his hole. . . . He trusted, in fact, just a little too far.)

Osmund's voice went on: 'I can't see straight now. You'd better look out, young Pengelly; you're coming with me. We're going for a long ride. You'll be cold . . . and then hot as hell. It's funny, Dick, that with all my chances I shouldn't have done better, but being put away does you a lot of harm. It makes you different

from the men who haven't been put away. You can't forget it, and they don't forget it either. It was bound to end the way it has. As angry as I am sometimes—but these Pengellys, they deserve all they get. There are a lot of them about.'

'Let go my arm, Osmund,' I whispered fiercely. 'And come out of this. Let Pengelly go. He won't interfere with you again. Come out of this. Where's Helen?'

But he didn't let my arm go, and I doubt whether he had heard any of this until the last word.

'Helen? Oh, she's here. So you took her gloves, Dick—as a love token. That upset me. And you were kissing one another too. That upset me. But I don't blame you. She's a very attractive woman, and we've said good-bye—she and I.'

Our whispering was beginning to attract attention. A man in front of us, seated against the barrier, turned round angrily and said 'Hush!'

But what precisely happened then where we stood I shall never know, for my eyes were suddenly transfixed. Seated in the extreme right-hand seat of the upper circle, in the half-light, visible to me very plainly from where I stood, was Hench. He must have moved from the pit to the circle.

He was sitting forward, not looking at the stage at all, his head between his hands.

'My God!' I whispered to Osmund, 'there's Hench!'

He did not hear me—or, if he heard, did not understand. His grip on my arm tightened.

And now what was Hench going to do? I could see that his heavy fat legs moved restlessly,

and that he jerked his head up from his knees and then down again. He was not still for a moment.

On the stage, a man and a woman, close to the fountain, were singing softly a love duet. The lights had darkened—only the tower, now jet black, stood forward against a sky thick with stars. The fountain still rose and fell, its waters throwing a silvery light.

I tried to pull my arm away. 'Let me go, Osmund. There's Hench down there. He'll be making some disturbance if I don't get to him. Let me go.' I saw that Pengelly on his side was wriggling and twisting. I could hear his little suppressed pants.

But all I got for my interruption was from the man in front, who, furious now, turned round and let out in a seething whisper: 'If you don't bloody well be quiet I'll call the attendant. What do you think I paid my money for? To hear you talk?'

But he had more than his money's worth that night, for on top of his furious whisper I saw that Hench had sprung to his feet and was shouting!

I had for the last five minutes been expecting something of the kind—indeed, in some way that only added to the fantasy of the whole scene, I seemed to hear him some distinct moment before he began his interruption.

When the interruption actually came the effect of it was striking enough.

Only twice before had I witnessed any scandalous scene in a theatre—once, when touring France one Christmas with a Rugby football team,

in the Opera at Lyons there had been a deliberate arranged attempt to spoil the debut of some woman singer; the other when, at the St. James's Theatre in London, a gentleman in the stalls had suddenly risen during the interval and begun to take off all his clothes, succeeding, in fact, so thoroughly that he was stark naked before the attendants could get to him.

I remember on the second of these occasions the astonished sense that we had that our world was turning upside-down. Here we were proceeding so gently on our ordered course when, in a second of time, it was shown us that order was maintained only by permission of the authorities, who, from their cloudy seats, with a contemptuous turn of the wrist, could change us into pigs or rabbits or whatever suited their humour.

It was so now. I heard at first, before the interruptions became more general, the words that he shouted:

'Sinners!' he cried out in his silly, piping voice, breaking now to a hysterical shriek, 'God is at hand! Murderers! your crime has been witnessed!' I remember that he repeated the words 'God,' 'Murderers,' flinging out his arms, staggering forward and almost falling over the ridge of the upper circle into the dress circle below him.

Very quickly, of course, attendants were running to him, but everywhere there was confusion. Nearly everyone in the gallery stood up craning forward that they might see. There were

calls and cries from all over the theatre: 'What is it?' 'What's happened?' 'Who's hurt?' 'There's a lady fainted' . . . and meanwhile the pretty, silly duet continued in front of the dark tower, the fountain gently splashing, and all the stars in the sky sparkled with more than their natural fervour.

I had for a moment lost sight of Hench. I caught a glimpse of him again—the last that I was ever to see of him—struggling with two attendants, his head back, his collar and shirt torn, his chest bare.

There was one last triumphant cry: 'We are lost—lost, lost!' ending in that silly feminine shriek that took all dignity, I fear, from his prophecies. Poor Hench! For all that trouble and agony there were only in the morning newspapers two lines, speaking of a disturbance at the Trafalgar Theatre, and adding that the gentleman, after being detained, was found to be suffering from a nervous breakdown and was permitted to go to his home.

Hench became later, I believe, an itinerant preacher—very popular at seaside resorts in the summer, and, so far as I am aware, no mention of Pengelly's death ever passed his lips again.

The importance for us of his outburst lay in its effect on Osmund. Around us, as I have said, people were rising on every side, exclaiming, asking questions, some nervous persons leaving the theatre.

Osmund turned also as though to go. I swung free of him, and Pengelly almost did the same. He

was close to me now and I could see his distress. One thing very disastrous for him had occurred. In his struggles to free himself his spectacles had in some way been jolted off his nose. His face, now dripping with sweat, and without the glasses, was shining with terror! His eyes were never still, his mouth moved ceaselessly, and he was always moistening his lips with his tongue.

He was close to me now, and he gasped: 'For God's sake . . . help me out of this. . . . The man's mad. He'll do in the lot of us. And my glasses—they've fallen—I'm blind without them—I'm helpless. Find them—for God's sake, find them.'

I had, Heaven knows, little reason for sympathy with the man, but I felt then that the one thing that mattered was to find those spectacles. I dropped down on to the dusty floor and began to grope. I wondered, even as I searched, why Pengelly didn't call loudly for help, and I still am wondering. I can only suppose, as I have already said, that he had the best of reasons for not wishing any public attention drawn to himself. But in fact, while I was on my knees in the darkness, every kind of question was crackling in my brain. Where was Helen? What should we do if Osmund went amok and ran riot over the gallery? And again—where, where was Helen? It was only weeks later that I remembered to ask her that question, and found that she had been playing, on the further side of Pengelly, the same sort of part as I and suffering much the same agitation.

Indeed the antics of all of us would by now

have caused attention had it not been for Hench's disturbance.

But now things moved fast, for Pengelly jerked himself free, and had slipped in an instant to the door. Osmund had followed, I with him. Pengelly might have escaped, and my story have had a very different ending, or possibly no ending at all, had it not been that he was confused by a group of women who, leaving the theatre because of Hench's outcry, were standing in a silly bunch at the stair-head cackling like geese.

He could not see; the world was a mist before his eyes; he turned to the right instead of the left, pushed back a door, and stumbled upwards to the roof. Although this door was marked 'Private,' and was, I suppose, in general, locked, it was open enough now, but dark. Close behind Osmund, I met, at the same moment as he, a blast of the wind, went after him to find him on his knees by the door-ledge, peering forward into the darkness.

I stood beside him and stared about me. It was a strange enough scene. In front of me and around me was the upper world of London. In spite of the blackness of the sky, heavy and thick, as though roll upon roll of velvet were pressing down upon our heads, in spite also of the snow that was now beginning to fall thickly and was stroking my cheeks with a million chilly fingers, the scene was lit with the trembling, jumping, witch-like illuminations of the electric sky-signs.

I was, in fact, almost on a level with one of them—a vast rose that opened its petals slowly,

luxuriantly, to allow a thin, tapering bottle of scent to emerge and return, then closed again. All about the crimson and gold of this sign the heavy black sky was illuminated; but for the most part the reflections in the sky were from unseen lights, and it was as though London itself were leaping and jumping to see whether it could touch the sky with its golden fingers. I could see no sign of Hench. A moment later I turned to find Helen had joined us.

Osmund saw her.

'Go back, Helen,' he said. 'Haven't we said good-bye already? Go back.'

She caught his arm. 'John, come with me. Let the wretched man go. You have frightened him enough. Come home with me, John. Come home. Come home.' Her voice trembled in its urgency. She must have seen that I was there, but I don't think that I even existed for her just then.

'Home?' he answered, and I remember the scorn he put into that word. 'Home? I have none. I belong to nothing, to nobody. Let me finish with this little swine and I'll die happy. One virtue equals one crime. Isn't it so? Go back, Helen, you've no place here. The storm will blow you off your feet, and it's a long way to fall. Did you hear what Hench said? He damned the lot of them. Well, I'm damned with the rest, but I'll take that little rotter with me. He shan't deny his Maker more than another five minutes.' Then he called: 'Hi, Pengelly! Where are you? . . . Come out and join your

brother. I'll stuff your mouth with snow to stop your lying words!'

He started off across the flat of the roof.

I gripped Helen's arm. 'Stay here, Helen,' I said, 'you can do no good by coming. A hurricane blowing up. Wait. . . . I'll bring him back.' Something like that. I spoke incoherently. Twenty minutes later and all our destinies would have been changed. The performance over, the fireman or another would have come to discover what we were about. As it was, Hench's interruption had drawn them all down to that part of the theatre.

Eerie experience enough, plunging about on that roof. The storm was indeed blowing up, and the little squat chimneys, the black peaks of the roofs, hanging so narrowly over Little Windmill Street, seemed to bend and swing with the storm. As I moved I saw to my right an aperture from which light was streaming, and found that it was the small room whence the projectors flung their colours upon the stage. I caught for an instant a view from the blackness of this roof through to the stage, little figures dancing upon it, and a crimson curtain swinging backwards as I looked.

But my business was with Osmund, and I stumbled along, scarcely able to keep my feet for the storm.

I had a moment just then, I remember, of intense loneliness and fear. I was, I suspect, a trifle off my head like the rest of them by this time. I could hear nothing but the whistle and shudder

of the storm. My eyes were blinded with snow, but behind the blindness was the reflection of the dancing lights. All London seemed to be leaping to get at me, and yet around and about me the wind was tearing to pull the city off its feet. In another moment perhaps it would succeed. A great exhilaration seized me. London seemed to be spinning on the Circus for its axis, and all the little buildings, the toy omnibuses, the dolls of men and women, were swinging too. Tug—tug—tug—tug—totter—totter—totter. The petty pile of brick and mortar was bending, swaying. . . . Over it must go, tossed into the air like smoke, spraying for one moment the firmament with its dust, gone then beyond the sight of man!

I shouted 'Osmund! Osmund! Osmund!' I waved my arms to push the snow from my eyes and my mouth. But all the adventures of the evening seemed to crowd into this moment.

Yes, I suppose I was mad like the rest, and, for an instant, had torn the curtain aside and seen through into reality beyond.

But mad only for an instant, for in another moment I stumbled right upon Pengelly. He was crouching against the wall. When I touched him he screamed. 'Leave me alone, you blasted ——' Then he saw that it wasn't Osmund. 'Here, get me away! I can't see. I can't see a thing. I've lost my glasses I daren't move. Oh, for God's sake get me away!'

He clung to me then, holding my thighs, his round face now dark, now illuminated with the flashing lights, turned up to mine.

'I can't see. Oh, sir, I've meant no harm. I don't want to die. It isn't right that I should. . . . I can't die. . . . I'm not ready.'

A moment later Osmund was upon us. He bent down and dragged Pengelly up. He held him to his breast.

'Friend . . .' I heard him say—'Friend or enemy. . . .' I tried to stop him. He was altogether unaware of me. I heard him sigh, then he lurched forward with Pengelly in his arms.

What happened then? I am still troubled with uncertainty. It seemed to me, I fancy, as now I look back, that a firm hand held me where I was. I do know that it was most bitter cold and that the wild snowstorm made it seem that the roof was moving beneath me and that the Circus, with its lights, its figures, came whirling upwards like the heaving side of the very globe itself.

I never heard Pengelly cry. There was a silence, a blindness, and, groping, I touched Helen's hand. . . .

Later the bodies were found, the snow already winding down upon them, in a yard behind the theatre. We told some story, Helen and I, that, finding the door open, they had climbed, laughing, on to the roof, tripped on the uneven surface, tried the one to save the other, and pitched over.

I remember also that, later, after the finding of

the bodies, Helen, I, and two policemen passed through the Circus, and I saw the little shabby woman arriving to take her blind man home. She was collecting carefully the coins out of the cup. I heard them chink.

That, then, was the end.

Next morning it was, I remember, as though a door had softly, finally, closed upon a room that I was never again to be permitted to enter. Of that storm and passion all that remained were two short paragraphs in the papers, one concerning Hench, the other concerning two careless (and probably tipsy) revellers. I never saw Buller again, nor do I know to this day how he rid the world of the elder Pengelly's body.

And was that room real? Had I ever seen it —the secretaire, the lovely Limoges triptych, the silver candlesticks, the peach-coloured rugs? Had it been the hallucination of the starving wanderer that, thanks to later good fortune, I shall never be again? No, I know well enough that it was real, for, happily married though Helen and I are, we carry, and shall always carry, John Osmund along with us. And the five rosy volumes of the *Quixote* are on my table before me as I write.

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